

## **Grown-up toys: aesthetic forms and transitional objects in Vernon Lee's supernatural tales.**

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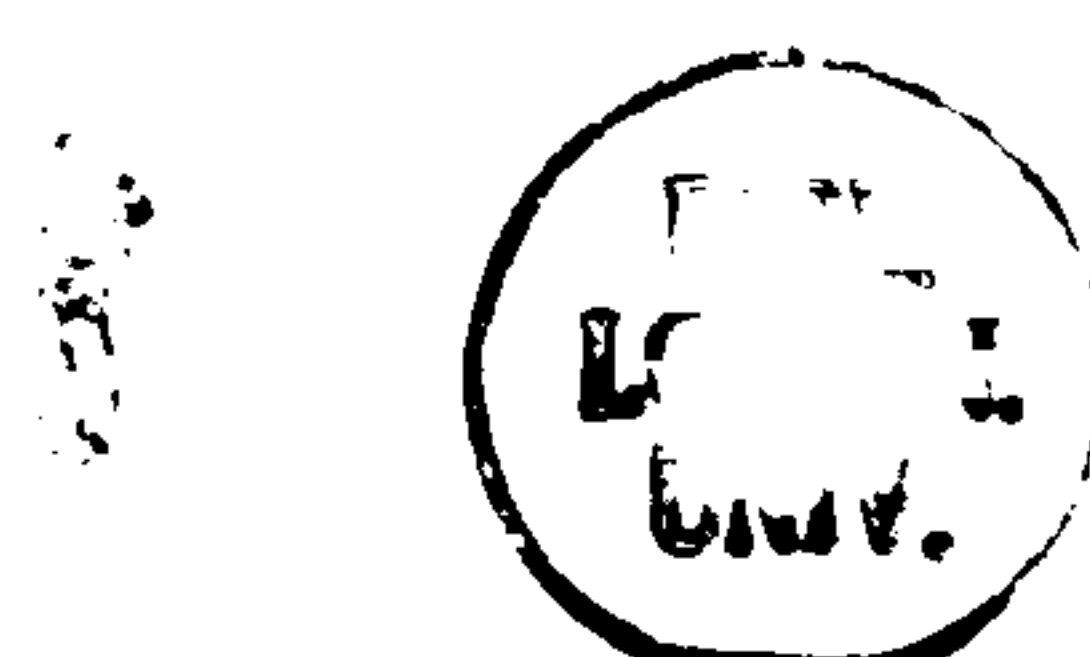
PhD Thesis

Grown-up Toys: Aesthetic Forms and Transitional Objects  
in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the fantastic tales of the marginalized writer Vernon Lee (Violet Paget 1856-1935), focusing on such collections as *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890), *Pope Jacynth and Other Fantastic Stories* (1904), and *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (1927). It traces the influence of European Romantics such as Hoffmann and Heine on her writings and juxtaposes Lee's work with that of fin-de-siècle contemporaries such as Walter Pater, Henry James, and Oscar Wilde. Her stories often depend on the supernatural properties of art objects for their uncanny effect, and this study traces the contradiction between Lee's concern with form in her aesthetic treatises, and the 'formless' and metamorphic qualities of the 'ghostly' objects that come to life in her works. The resultant conflict is explored in the context of D. W. Winnicott's 'transitional object' theory which suggests that a child's subjectivity is formed in a 'potential space', a space existing in a developmental 'limbo' in which the child plays with items or toys while negotiating its separation from the mother, and recognizing its individuality. According to Winnicott, in adulthood, this childhood process is reexperienced in the 'illusory' realm of art and cultural objects. With this premise in mind, this thesis argues that, in Lee's tales, the supernatural functions as a 'potential space' in which Lee 'plays' with the art object or 'toy' in order to explore alternative subjectivities that allow the expression of her lesbian subjectivity. Using an interdisciplinary approach which combines literature with psychology, aesthetics, mythology, religion, and social history, this thesis demonstrates the contemporary validity of Lee's tales, and its importance for the study of gender and sexuality in the nineteenth-century fin de siècle.

## **Acknowledgements**

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*We grown-up folks have got our toys: the Venus of Milo, Raphael's Madonnas, the music of Mozart or of Wagner, the whole poetry of the world, from the Vedic hymns to Austin Dobson; heroes and heroines, great men and beautiful women of the Past and the Present; all so much toy-shop stuff, made on purpose to banish weariness and trouble.*

Vernon Lee (1887)

## Introduction



In her preface to *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890), Vernon Lee rhetorically questions the reader's definition of a 'genuine ghost'.<sup>1</sup> For Lee, this figure is not to be found in the annals of the Society of Psychical Research, but in our own psyche for she asks, 'is not this he, or she, this one born of ourselves, of the weird places we have seen, the strange stories we have heard ?'<sup>2</sup> And their home is the Past, from which 'a legion of ghosts, very vague and changeful, are perpetually to and fro, fetching and carrying for us between it and the Present'.<sup>3</sup> Lee describes her own ghosts as 'spurious ghosts', images that have only an outward similarity to the traditional conception of the term, but they are ghosts that have haunted her nonetheless.<sup>4</sup> When one looks at the 'ghosts' which manifest themselves in Lee's fantastic tales, one is struck by their aesthetic properties. They often appear in the guise of ghostly singers, metamorphic sculptures, strange, uncanny dolls, or as portraits that come to life. This is perhaps only to be expected in the writings of a mind that is itself haunted by art, and their earthly relations can be found in the artworks and singers discussed in such works as *Belcaro* (1881), *Althea* (1894), *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895), and in her numerous treatises on musical aesthetics. Yet these physical counterparts lend Lee's 'ghosts' a 'solidity': they become 'art objects' in their own right which, for Lee, represent the 'toy-shop stuff' of adulthood.<sup>5</sup>

The association of the art object with the toy is not exclusive to Lee for in 'The Philosophy of Toys' (1853), Charles Baudelaire was to describe the toy as 'the child's

<sup>1</sup> Vernon Lee, preface to *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (London: Heinemann, 1890), pp. vii-xi, (p. x).

<sup>2</sup> Lee, preface to *Hauntings*, p. x.

<sup>3</sup> Lee, preface to *Hauntings*, p. xi.

<sup>4</sup> Lee, preface to *Hauntings*, p. xi.

<sup>5</sup> Vernon Lee, 'Christkindchen' in *Juvenilia: Being a Second Series of Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions*, 2 vols (London: Fisher Unwin, 1887), II, pp. 179-99, (p. 185).

earliest initiation into art'.<sup>6</sup> This identification between the art object and the toy resonates interestingly with one of the hypotheses put forward by D. W. Winnicott, in *Playing and Reality* (1971) in which he argues that adults transfer their childhood engagement with 'toys' or 'transitional objects' to art, and cultural objects.<sup>7</sup> The interesting parallel between the thoughts of Winnicott and Lee on this subject has inspired me to reconsider Lee's supernatural fiction in the light of Winnicott's theories. According to Winnicott, a child's subjectivity is formed through creative play in a 'holding environment' provided by the simultaneous absence and presence of the mother: the mother remains within the child's reach or call, but does not directly interact with him/her. Instead, the child interacts with a toy, or other item which, at this stage, it conceives as a part of itself. In this 'safe' space, which Winnicott calls a 'potential space', the child plays and gradually begins to separate the 'me' from the 'not-me', to develop its subjectivity. This thesis explores the liminal world of Lee's supernatural tales in terms of Winnicott's 'potential space' in which the transitional object takes centre stage. Viewed within Winnicott's theoretical framework, the predominance of the 'Past' in Lee's works, suggests not only an historical past, but also a psychic past that is grounded in childhood, and those art objects which inhabit the Past become 'transitional objects' or 'toys'. Moreover, this world is one which is haunted by the 'absent' presence of the mother for, as Diana Basham observes, in her writing, 'Vernon Lee is committed to keeping [her] ... dead mother supernaturally alive'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'Morale du JouJou' ('The Philosophy of Toys'), in *Oeuvres complètes de Baudelaire*, ed. by Charles Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), pp. 523-29, (p. 525). My own translation.

<sup>7</sup> D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 1971).

<sup>8</sup> Diana Basham, *The Trial of Woman: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 174.



Lee's fiction has become of interest to an increasing number of critics, many of whom have traced a sexual subtext in her work for it would seem that her unacknowledged lesbianism finds a latent correspondence within the fantasy space of her fiction. The covert homosexuality underlying Lee's fantastic tales has been addressed at length by Burdett Gardner, more briefly by Carlo Caballero in his discussion of 'A Wicked Voice' (1887), and by Jane Hotchkiss in her reading of 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' (1896), while Kathy Alexis Psomiades has been influential in highlighting the lesbian tensions in Lee's novel, *Miss Brown* (1884).<sup>9</sup>

Gardner's unsympathetic study, while comprehensive and informative, is limited by the vulgar Freudian determinism of its argument, and critics such as Psomiades and, more recently Diana Maltz, who are among those who have explored the link between desire and aesthetics in Lee's writings, centre their interest on Lee's 'psychological aesthetics' theory which examines the artwork through the viewer's physiological responses.<sup>10</sup> My thesis offers an alternative perspective, one which takes a wider, and more fluid view of Lee's works. Given that the fluidity of identity and sexuality that characterizes many of the players in Lee's stories, similarly typifies childhood identity, the exploration of her tales within the context of Winnicottian psychoanalysis provides

<sup>9</sup> See Burdett Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination (Victorian Style): A Psychological and Critical Study of 'Vernon Lee'* (New York: Garland, 1987), Carlo Caballero, '“A Wicked Voice”: On Vernon Lee, Wagner, and the Effects of Music', *Victorian Studies* 35, (1992), 385-408, Jane Hotchkiss, '(P)revising Freud: Vernon Lee's Castration Phantasy', in *Seeing Double: Revisioning Edwardian and Modernist Literature*, ed. by Carola M. Kaplan and Anne B. Simpson (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 21-38, Kathy Alexis Psomiades, *Beauty's Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), and '“Still Burning from This Strangling Embrace”: Vernon Lee on Desire and Aesthetics', in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. by Richard Dellamora (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 21-41.

<sup>10</sup> Diana Maltz, 'Engaging “Delicate Brains”: From Working-Class Enculturation to Upper-Class Lesbian Liberation in Vernon Lee and Kit Anstruther-Thomson's Psychological Aesthetics', in *Women and British Aestheticism*, ed. by Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), pp. 211-29.

enlightening insights into the homoerotic subtexts of Lee's work, and uncovers Lee's search for her own sexuality and identity: a search which is implicit in the ambiguity of her chosen pseudonym - Vernon Lee. Here, I demonstrate that, using this matrix, the 'potential space' of Lee's supernatural tales becomes a space within which Lee 'plays' with alternative identities, functioning as a form of 'Dionysian' space which provides an escape from the 'Apollonian' forms which govern her aesthetics and which play a significant role in the projection of her own intellectual and sexual persona.

The conflict between Apollonian and Dionysian forms of art spans Lee's oeuvre, appearing in early writings such as *Belcaro*, and reappearing in late works such as *The Handling of Words* (1923). Nietzsche's treatise, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), which posits the existence of this dichotomy in Greek art and religion, evidently struck a chord with Lee.<sup>11</sup> The 'Apollonian' strand, with its emphasis on reason, restraint, dignity, nobility, and clarity, appeals to Lee's intellectuality: it 'purifies' art, and suppresses emotion whilst finding its aesthetic model in the clear lines and physical forms of sculpture. In contrast, the 'Dionysian' element, characterized by chaos, cruelty, sexual abandon, and chthonian darkness, manifests itself in the emotional aesthetic of music, and in Greek tragic drama, which was initially a musical form. Lee was to write extensively on each of these arts. Whilst appropriating the Apollonian principle in her discussions of sculpture, she rejected the Dionysian element in the orderly perfection of eighteenth-century music, and argued for its existence only in the melodramatic turmoil of 'modern'

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<sup>11</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. by Shaun Whiteside, ed. by Michael Tanner, (London: Penguin, 1993). Lee's fascination with Nietzsche finds expression in works ranging from essays such as 'Nietzsche and the "Will to Power"', in *Gospels of Anarchy and Other Contemporary Studies* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1908), pp. 159-89 to treatises such as *The Handling of Words and other Studies in Literary Psychology* (1923). Annotated copies of *Beyond Good and Evil*, and *Der Fall Wagner und Nietzsche contra Wagner* can be found in her library at the British Institute in Florence.



compositions, epitomized by the works of Wagner. Yet Lee's own work is itself marked by the Dionysian. It haunts her writings on aesthetics, and manifests itself in force in her supernatural tales. It is perhaps inevitable that this should be so for, as Burdett Gardner has noted, in Lee's fantastic stories, her style displays those lilting cadences, and rhythmic refrains that are features of musical compositions.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, this Dionysian trait produces a side-effect which is of particular importance in the exploration of identity. It allows the dissolution of boundaries: between the Past and the Present, between illusion and reality, between self and Other. It lures us into those borderlands which we keep at bay in our everyday existence and, for Lee, I would argue, it provides an elemental space in which to 'play' with her identity and her sexuality.

This fascinating struggle between the Apollonian and the Dionysian principle is at its height in Lee's supernatural world which is peopled by figures such as Marsyas, and Venus, who are revenants, exiles from the world of Greek myth, by Christian effigies, and by 'historical' ghosts who return from more recent periods: the Renaissance, Jacobean times, or the eighteenth century, but who have mythic qualities of their own, and find their counterparts in Marsyas, Venus, Medusa and the Sphinx. This thesis argues that these myths, whether of ancient or recent origin, perform a crucial role. I claim that it is through these mythic figures that Lee plays with identity, that their shape-shifting, metamorphic nature, embodied in those 'objets d'art' which function as 'transitional objects', allows her to explore her sexuality in a 'safe' space: a space removed from the concerns and constraints of contemporary morality.

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<sup>12</sup> See Gardner, especially Ch. 1.

The importance of myth in the literary expression of inadmissible desires has been usefully exploited by critics such as Martha Vicinus, who has argued that, in the literature of the *fin de siècle*, reworkings of myths served to codify Decadent disclosures of homoerotic desire, and by Camille Paglia, whose wide-ranging *Sexual Personae* (1990) contains suggestive readings that have occasionally prompted my own. While Paglia's views are often contentious, her work is nevertheless imaginative and illuminating, and the seemingly effortless melding of 'literature, art history, psychology, and religion' that characterizes *Sexual Personae* is a helpful model for my own interdisciplinary approach, which combines literature, psychology, aesthetics, mythology, religion, and social history.<sup>13</sup>

However, this thesis differs substantially from the work of Vicinus and of Paglia in that it focuses specifically on the psychological value of the art object in the context of Vernon Lee's supernatural fiction. While my enquiry is predicated on Winnicott's theory of play, other psychoanalytic matrices, primarily Freudian and Kristevan, are employed where they complement individual discussions. Freud's own analyses, often grounded in Greek myth and in literature, provide, as Hotchkiss and Gardner have found, useful frameworks within which to explore the mythological aspects of Lee's supernatural fiction. Like Hotchkiss, and unlike Gardner, however, I adopt a revisionist approach in my own application of his theories to Lee's work.

In order to show the particularity of the role played by the art object in Lee's tales, I read her work alongside that of male contemporaries such as Walter Pater, Henry James, Thomas Hardy, and Oscar Wilde. Her stories are also juxtaposed with those of

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<sup>13</sup> Camille Paglia, preface to *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. xiii.

her precursors, Hoffmann, Balzac, and Mérimée, which were undoubtedly known to Lee, and whose echoes can be traced in her tales. In addition, they act as representations of that European literature which influenced Lee's literary sensibilities. One exception is Tommaso Landolfi, whose tale, 'Gogol's Wife' (1954), published after Lee's death, has been included for its interesting resonances with Lee's tale 'The Doll' and with Hoffmann's 'The Sandman'. Due to the unfamiliarity of some of the texts used in the thesis, the main storyline of each is recapitulated using selected quotations which are of later critical interest.

The thesis is divided into four chapters, examining in turn, the voice-object, (represented by the operatic voice), the statue, the doll, and the portrait. Chapter One focuses on the castrato voice and traces its significance in Lee's work, both in her aesthetic philosophy, and in her supernatural tales. Having linked this androgynous voice to the turn-of-the-century 'mannish woman', and to the mythological figure, Medusa, I demonstrate that the castrato becomes an alternative identity for Lee. Within the supernatural space, the castrato's hypnotic voice also functions as a maternal substitute, providing a Winnicottian 'holding environment' in which Lee 'plays' and explores her androgynous sexuality. Chapter Two tracks the continuing importance of the castrato voice in Lee's aesthetics, and shows that her writings on sculpture are influenced by those concerns that characterize her appreciation of music. It then examines the myths which inform those stories featuring statues, and explores the metamorphic nature of these sculptural objects, and their importance to Lee's negotiation of identity. Chapter Three returns to the sculpture, and shows the correlation between the statue and the doll in



Lee's work, before focusing on the fundamental difference between the two - colour - and looking at the role played by colour in the expression of lesbian desire. Subsequently, it argues that the doll-object provides a surface for the projection of Lee's transgressive sexuality, as well as figuring as a form of 'phallic mother': a potent figure of androgyny. Chapter Four revisits Lee's tale, 'The Doll', in which the figure, a portrait of a dead beloved, functions as a 'memento mori' before exploring Lee's own thoughts on commemorative portraiture, and examining the treatment of the portrait in her tales. Highlighting the Medusan properties of the women in Lee's portrait-tales, I argue that, as *femmes fatales*, they are intimately related to the 'phallic mother' and once again represent the expression of a powerful, and sexually ambiguous, entity in the Dionysian space of the supernatural.

This thesis intentionally avoids a reductive conclusion. Although its primary aim is to suggest that Lee's supernatural tales offer a 'safe' space in which her androgynous identity can be free to express her lesbianism, it achieves this through a complex network of associations which posits Lee's work as a rich source for discussion, having fascinating implications for the study of gender and identity at the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* and beyond.

## Castrato Cries and Wicked Voices

*O dream of poet passing every bound!  
 My thoughts have built a fancy of thy form,  
 Till it is molten into silver sound,  
 And boy and girl are one in cadence warm.*  
 Théophile Gautier (1849)<sup>1</sup>

In the opening chapter to a collection of essays entitled *Belcaro* (1881), Vernon Lee describes her sensations on completing her first published work, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880):

When, two summers since, I wrote the last pages of my first book, it was, in a way, as if I had been working out the plans of another dead individual. The myself who had, almost as a child, been insanely bewitched by the composers and singers, the mask actors and pedants, and fine ladies and fops, ... this myself, thus smitten with the Italian 18th century, had already ceased to exist.<sup>2</sup>

This eighteenth-century world, the subject of her literary debut, for which she had acquired a love ‘at an age ... where some of us are still the creatures of an unconscious play-instinct’ functioned as a ‘remote lumber-room full of discarded mysteries and of lurking ghosts, where a half-grown young prig might satisfy, in unsuspecting gravity mere childlike instincts of make-believe and romance’.<sup>3</sup> For Lee, the child that played in this world had been replaced by ‘Another myself’: a more discerning and discursive self who saw ‘what the original collector had never guessed: illustrations, partial explanations’, and ‘questions of artistic genesis and evolution, of artistic right and wrong’ and ‘This new

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Contralto’, in *Emaux et Camées*, trans. by Mrs Agnes Lee (1903), in *The Works of Théophile Gautier*, 24 vols, trans. by P. J. T. Sumichrast, (London: Harrap, 1900-1903), XXIV, pp. 70-73, (p.71).

<sup>2</sup> Vernon Lee, ‘The Book and Its Title’, in *Belcaro: Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: Satchell, 1883), pp. 1-16, (pp. 3-4). I use this edition throughout.

<sup>3</sup> Vernon Lee, preface to *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1907), pp. xv-xlix, (p. xvi).



myself', she writes, 'is the myself by whom has been written this present book'.<sup>4</sup> The passage implies a system of development and individuation that is played out through Lee's responses to Italian art and culture in the earlier text. Lee's words suggest not only the discovery of the self, but an anxiety to present that self as a mature writer who has surfaced from the chrysalis of childhood fantasy and engaged in the adult language of philosophy and aesthetics. Yet, her other self, the 'bewitched' child, continues to haunt the pages of *Belcaro*.

In the essay entitled 'The Child in the Vatican', Lee invents what she calls 'a fairy tale' in which a young child becomes the toy of the 'Statue-demons' that line the palace corridors who determine 'to cast a spell upon it which would make it theirs'.<sup>5</sup> The child continues to live its ordinary life, but slowly begins to experience some inexplicable changes when it sees a beautiful landscape or hears a stray bar of music:

little by little, into its everyday life, stole strange symptoms; sometimes there would come like a sudden stop, as of a boat caught in the rushes, a consciousness of immobility in the midst of swirling, flowing movement, a giddy brain-swimming feeling.<sup>6</sup>

Eventually the child becomes aware that it is no longer a child and realizes that it had been learning something which others did not know. This esoteric knowledge is conveyed through music:

For it heard one day a few pages of a symphony of Mozart's; the first it had ever heard save much more modern music; and those bars of symphony were

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<sup>4</sup> Lee, 'The Book and Its Title', p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Lee, 'The Child in the Vatican', in *Belcaro*, pp. 17-48, (p. 24).

<sup>6</sup> Lee, 'The Child in the Vatican', p. 26.

intelligible words, conveyed to the child a secret. And the secret was: 'we are the brethern [*sic*], the sounding ones of the statues: and all we who are brethern [*sic*], whether in stone, or sound, or colour, or written word, shall to thee speak in such a way that thou recognise us, and distinguish us from others; and thou shalt love and believe only in us and those of our kin'.<sup>7</sup>

That the child in the Vatican is Lee herself, there is little doubt. In his biography of Lee, Peter Gunn quotes her description of an early visit to St Peter's in Rome during which she is enthralled by 'the quavering notes of singers', the 'shrill blasts of trumpets' and the 'white splendour of the pontifical robes and jewels'.<sup>8</sup> Lee writes:

From that moment everything seemed changed ... I was wild to be taken into those dark, damp little churches ... full of long, sweet, tearful, almost infantine notes of voices, whose strange sweetness seemed to cut into your soul, only to pour into the wound some mysterious narcotic balm. I was wild to be taken to the chilly galleries ... [where] all those gods, all those goddesses, and nymphs, and heroes, all that nude and white and ice-cold world seemed to seek me with their blank, white glance, smiling with the faint and ironical smile which means - 'This creature is ours'.<sup>9</sup>

It seems suggestive that, in both the fictional and the factual text, Lee's initiation into this world of art and culture from which she emerges as an adult writer is marked primarily by a response to music and the voice, for both were to play an important part in her supernatural tales and in her work on aesthetics, as well as being a propelling force in her drama, *Ariadne in Mantua* (1903).

In an added introduction to her 1907 edition of *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, Lee acknowledges the role played by music in her artistic development. She tells

<sup>7</sup> Lee, 'The Child in the Vatican', p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Gunn, p. 38.

of the mixed feelings of pleasure and pain she experiences as an adolescent whilst listening to her mother singing and playing a selection of airs from transcriptions of eighteenth-century songs newly received from Bologna. The first piece her mother plays is *Pallido il Sole*, ‘one of the three legendary airs ... with which the madness of Saul-Philip of Spain had been soothed by virtuous David-Farinelli’, the Italian castrato.<sup>10</sup> Lee writes,

I could not remain in the presence ... of what, I really do not know; I felt shy of those unknown, much longed-for songs, and had to escape into the garden ... I can still feel the sickening fear, mingled with shame, *lest the piece should turn out to be hideous*. For if *Pallido il Sole* should turn out to be hideous, why ... It is impossible to put into words the overwhelming sense that on that piece hung the fate of a world, the only one which mattered - the world of my fancies and longings.<sup>11</sup>

For Lee, the fate of her imaginative world, ‘the only one which mattered’ depends on this song, indicating the importance of music to her creativity. It is music that first ‘speaks’ to her and that empowers her aesthetic appreciation and her subsequent literary production.

Music and the word, then, are intertwined in Lee’s artistic formation and it seems fitting that much of her musical philosophy addresses that fusion of word and music, the operatic voice: a voice that also dominates two of her short stories, ‘A Culture Ghost: Winthrop’s Adventure’ (1881) and ‘A Wicked Voice’ (1889). In these tales the traumatic sensations elicited in Lee as she listens to her mother singing eighteenth-century arias, are evoked by the castrato voice which first makes its appearance in the ‘enchanted garret’ of

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<sup>10</sup> Lee, preface to *Studies*, p. xlviii.

<sup>11</sup> Lee, preface to *Studies*, p. xlviii.



her childhood imagination.<sup>12</sup> Here, in this magical, illusory realm, where she is often held in thrall by her mother's voice, Lee 'plays', and finds her creative self in a pattern that suggests Winnicott's theoretical process of individuation which occurs in the potential space between child and mother, an intermediate space in which the child must develop from 'a state of being merged with the mother' to 'a stage of separating out the mother from the self'.<sup>13</sup> Here, in this 'resting-place' the individual is 'engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated', an area of illusion which in adult life emerges in art and culture.<sup>14</sup>

In *Belcaro*, as we have seen, Lee marks her artistic development by rejecting the fancies and longings of childhood. Yet these fantasies return forcefully in her fiction, often 'haunted' both literally and figuratively by the maternal voice. In the following discussion I intend to examine the ways in which this voice functions in Lee's fictional texts, but before I do so I would like to look at the definition of the word 'voice' and its particular implications for Lee, as a woman writer at the *fin de siècle*.

### **'Hens that Crow': the Maternal Song and the Vocal Object**

Voice is defined as the 'sound formed in the human larynx' that expresses itself in speaking, shouting, and singing, but it also means to express an opinion, to have the 'right or privilege of speaking or voting in a legislative assembly, or of taking part in, or exercising control over some particular matter', for example in political decisions.<sup>15</sup> The

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<sup>12</sup> Lee, preface to *Studies*, p. xvi.

<sup>13</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 107.

<sup>14</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> *O.E.D.* 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

latter definition of ‘voice’ increased in importance for women at the turn of the century.

With the advent of a more militant commitment to women’s suffrage, the female orator became not only increasingly visible but intensely disturbing. Elaine Showalter observes that:

The 1880s and the 1890s, in the words of the novelist George Gissing, were decades of ‘sexual anarchy’, when all the laws that governed sexual identity and behaviour seemed to be breaking down.<sup>16</sup>

Showalter goes on to point out that the woman speaker was considered particularly deviant for ‘To claim the pulpit or the podium was in itself ... a transgression of “womanly” modesty’.<sup>17</sup> The ‘mannish woman orator’ was an object of ridicule, and during this period anti-feminist literature in the form of cartoons, sermons, and caricatures proliferated.<sup>18</sup> This transgressive female orator was mirrored by her literary counterpart. By the 1880s and 1890s women writers were ‘a major presence’ in the publishing world, and many of their works challenged the social and sexual limitations traditionally imposed on women.<sup>19</sup>

Despite being critical of women ‘who saw the future for their sex in an aping of purely masculine behaviour’,<sup>20</sup> Lee, although ‘no suffragette’, certainly ‘wanted a vote’ and sympathized with their cause, recognizing discrimination against women as one of the

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<sup>16</sup>Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, 1992), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup>Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, p. 24.

<sup>18</sup> Claire Kahane, *Passions of the Voice: Hysteria, Narrative, and the Figure of the Speaking Woman, 1850-1915* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Elaine Showalter, introduction to *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1995), pp. vii-viii, (p. vi).

<sup>20</sup> Gunn, p. 9.

‘long-organized social evils’.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, as a female writer whose work constantly encroached on the predominantly masculine fields of art, history, and aesthetics, and who was herself often referred to as ‘trenchant’ and ‘outspoken’, Lee cannot avoid being associated with the powerful speaking woman.<sup>22</sup> On the fly-leaf of his copy of Lee’s *Gospels of Anarchy* (1908), which contains the essay ‘The Economic Parasitism of Women’ that discusses, amongst other things, the inequalities of the female condition in society, Max Beerbohm wrote:

Oh dear! Poor dear dreadful little lady! Always having a crow to pick, ever so coyly, with Nietzsche, or a wee lance to break with Mr. Carlyle, or a sweet but sharp little warning to whisper in the ear of Mr. H.G. Wells, or Strindberg or Darwin or D’Annunzio! How artfully at this moment she must be button-holing Einstein! And Signor Croce - and Mr. James Joyce!<sup>23</sup>

Beerbohm’s satiric diminution of Lee is perhaps a manifestation of masculine anxiety for, as Peter Gunn observes, ‘what an impressive string of celebrities he needs to hang the “poor, dear, dreadful little lady” ’.<sup>24</sup> What is significant, however, is that Beerbohm’s passage highlights an important factor in this anxiety: her ‘voice’.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, whether spoken or written, this voice is judged in relation to Lee’s sex and its attendant social limitations, a constraint which is exacerbated by the language in which her thoughts must be expressed, for as Cora Kaplan writes:

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<sup>21</sup> Jane Hotchkiss, ‘(P)revising Freud: Vernon Lee’s Castration Phantasy’ in *Seeing Double: Revisioning Edwardian and Modernist Literature* ed. by Carola M. Kaplan and Anne B. Simpson (London: MacMillan, 1996) pp. 21-38, (p. 26).

<sup>22</sup> Gunn, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Gunn, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Gunn, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> For further reference to the reception of Lee’s ‘talk’ among her contemporaries, see Gardner pp. 53-64.



Social entry into patriarchal culture is made in language, through speech. Our individual speech does not, therefore, free us in any simple way from the ideological constraints of our culture since it is through the forms that articulate those constraints that we speak in the first place.<sup>26</sup>

Adopting a pseudonym which could be interpreted as masculine, it appears that Lee herself was certainly aware of the need to masquerade as male in order to be taken seriously in the literary world for, as she writes in December 1878, 'I don't care that Vernon Lee should be known to be myself or any other young woman, as I am sure that no one reads a woman's writing on art, history or aesthetics with anything but unmitigated contempt'.<sup>27</sup> These 'mannish women' who violated the codes of acceptable female behaviour were labelled 'hens that crow' by the New York Herald (Sept. 1852), a comparison that unquestionably highlights the double-bind which fettered the female orator and the female writer: to speak was to be unsexed, and the language in which one spoke remained indubitably male.<sup>28</sup>

The problematic nature of this voice as it manifests itself in female writing has been extensively discussed, most prominently by French feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, both of whom ground their debates in a valorization of the maternal voice which is frequently represented as 'the marker of a specifically feminine space that predates and eludes inscription in the oppressions of a phallogentric discursive system'.<sup>29</sup>

Cixous, for example, writes that, 'The voice is the uterus'; it is '[the] song before the law, before ... the symbolic;' it can 'make the text gasp or fill it with suspense or silences,

<sup>26</sup> Cora Kaplan, 'Language and Gender', in *Literature in the Modern World* ed. by Dennis Walder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 310-16, (p. 312).

<sup>27</sup> Gunn, p. 66.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Kahane, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Felicia Miller Frank, *The Mechanical Song: Women, Voice, and the Artificial in Nineteenth-Century French Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 40.

anaphorize it or tear it apart with cries'.<sup>30</sup> Masculine 'writing by the written' is contrasted with feminine 'writing by the voice'; an opposition which arises from 'an essential connection to the voice that man lacks and the maternal woman has': a time-honoured association which stems perhaps from 'the antique figures of sybils and sirens', as well as from the maternal lullaby.<sup>31</sup> Hélène Cixous, like Irigaray, also 'consistently exploits the age-old association of mother and water'.<sup>32</sup> Cixous favours 'topoi of the continuity and variety of the rhythms and songs of "our women's waters"', whilst for Irigaray this feminine fluidity is 'both the amniotic waters ... and also ... the movement of the sea' which opposes 'the solid that the penis represents'.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, this fluidity is discernible in the female voice for when 'that woman-thing speaks ... it speaks fluid'.<sup>34</sup>

Critics such as Domna Stanton and Claire Kahane rightly challenge the validity of arguments which unavoidably reinforce 'the binary logic of opposition that produced them',<sup>35</sup> but whatever the arguments for or against, the maternal models posited by French feminists in relation to female writing do provide an interesting parallel to psychoanalytic theories of the maternal voice for both are said to play their role in the development of subjectivity. Guy Rosolato, for example, has called the maternal voice a 'blanket of sound', a 'sonorous envelope'.<sup>36</sup> For Didier Anzieu it is 'a bath of sounds', a

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<sup>30</sup>Quoted in Domna Stanton, 'Difference on Trial: A Critique of the Maternal Metaphor in Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva', in *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. by Carolyn G. Heilbrun and Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 157-82, (p. 167).

<sup>31</sup> Cixous, quoted in Stanton, p. 167; Stanton, p.167; Frank, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup>Stanton, p. 169.

<sup>33</sup>Quoted in Stanton, p. 169.

<sup>34</sup>Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 111.

<sup>35</sup> Frank, p. 42.

<sup>36</sup> Rosolato, quoted in Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: the Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 72.



phrase which associates the voice with feminine fluidity.<sup>37</sup> Claude Bailblé describes it simply as ‘music’.<sup>38</sup> ‘These tropes of the voice’ as Claire Kahane observes, ‘are analogous to Winnicott’s “holding environment” ’ or intermediate space in which the child’s process of individuation takes place.<sup>39</sup> Here, the child is both surrounded and nurtured in an external mirror of the conditions in the mother’s womb. Within the safety of this space, the child plays with transitional objects, exploring and discovering the separate identity of objects which it has hitherto understood as parts of itself, thus allowing it to acknowledge its separation from the mother and to form its subjectivity. Yet, as Lacan suggests, the mother’s voice itself must also function as a transitional object, (an object like the breast, the faeces, a loved blanket or doll), from which the child must separate itself in order to become an independent subject.<sup>40</sup> In this scenario, the maternal voice can function as a metaphor of nightmarish entrapment. Michel Chion’s discussion of the maternal voice in his book *La Voix au Cinema* highlights this aspect:

In the beginning, in the uterine night, was the voice, that of the Mother. For the child after birth, the Mother is more an olfactory and vocal continuum than an image. One can imagine the voice of the Mother, which is woven around the child, and which originates from all points in space as her form enters and leaves the visual field, as a matrix of places to which we are tempted to give the name ‘umbilical net’. A horrifying expression, since it evokes a cobweb - and in fact, this original vocal tie will remain ambivalent.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Anzieu, quoted in Silverman, p. 72.

<sup>38</sup> Bailblé, quoted in Silverman, p. 72.

<sup>39</sup> Kahane, p. 17.

<sup>40</sup> In his essay, ‘The Blue Note’ and ‘The Objectified Voice and the Vocal Object’, *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 3 (1991), 195-211, Michel Poizat explains that for Lacan, ‘the voice takes its place alongside other objects of the drives identified by Freud: oval object (the breast), anal object (faeces), [and] genital object (the penis)’, see p. 210.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Silverman, p. 74.

In her reading of Chion's work, Kaja Silverman claims that the biblical resonance of Chion's words opposes 'the maternal voice to the paternal word' thus identifying 'the mother with sound and the father with meaning'.<sup>42</sup> This gendered opposition between sound and meaning seems to have particular significance in relation to the operatic voice. In his now famous article, ' "The Blue Note" and "The Objectified Voice and the Vocal Object" ', Michel Poizat writes of the common disruption inevitably experienced by the music lover - constructed here as male - who attempts to follow the text in the libretto whilst listening to a recording of a favourite opera. Certain musical passages are found to wrest the attention from the printed matter and he loses himself in listening, becoming increasingly oblivious to the written text. Yet, as Poizat observes, the listener feels what he describes as 'a radical antagonism' between letting himself be swept away by the emotion and applying himself to the meaning of each word as it is sung.<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, this disturbing voice is characterized as feminine. It is woman's song which presents itself as,

pure music free of all ties to speech; singing which literally destroys speech in pursuit of a purely musical melody, a melody that develops little by little until it verges on the cry. In instants such as these, when language disappears and is gradually superseded by the cry, an emotion arises which is expressible only by the irruption of something that signals the feeling of absolute loss, by the sob; finally a point is reached where the listener himself is stripped of all possibility of speech.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Silverman, p. 75.

<sup>43</sup> Poizat, p. 199.

<sup>44</sup> Poizat, p. 199.

In *Belcaro*, in the essay entitled 'Chapelmaster Kreisler', Vernon Lee, too, acknowledges this contraposition between song and speech. She writes:

We are apt to think of music as a sort of speech until, on examination, we find it has no defined meaning either for the speaker or for the listener ... as long as both exist only in embryo in the confused cries and rude imitations of the child ... they cannot be distinguished; but as soon as they can be called either speech or music, they become unlike and increase in dissimilarity in proportion as they develop.<sup>45</sup>

Lee further delineates the division: the cry becomes on the one hand 'the word' which, 'as it develops, acquires a more precise and abstract signification, becomes more and more of a symbol', and on the other, 'the song' which becomes 'more and more a complete unsymbolical form'.<sup>46</sup> The word, Lee argues, turns into 'a written sign', whilst the song, 'having become an object of mere pleasure, requires more and more musical development, and is transported from the lips of man to the strings of an instrument'.<sup>47</sup>

I will say more about Lee's transposition of the voice onto the musical instrument in due course as I believe it has interesting implications for the manifestations of voice in her fiction. Aside from this development, however, Lee's theory of the voice can clearly be related to Julia Kristeva's formulation of the 'semiotic' and the 'symbolic'. For Kristeva, the semiotic 'precedes the symbolic order, which is identified with the paternal law of the father', thus linking the semiotic to the 'preverbal period during which the child is bound to and depends on the mother's body and rhythms'.<sup>48</sup> This relationship with the mother's body is suppressed as the child enters into language and subjectivity, yet the

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<sup>45</sup> Lee, 'Chapelmaster Kreisler: A Study of Musical Romanticists', in *Belcaro*, pp. 106-28, (pp. 114-15).

<sup>46</sup> Lee, 'Chapelmaster Kreisler', p. 115.

<sup>47</sup> Lee, 'Chapelmaster Kreisler', p. 116.

<sup>48</sup> Frank, p. 44.



semiotic continues to exist within the symbolic sometimes threatening the symbolic's monopoly of language particularly in poetic language which, according to Frank, Kristeva defines as 'the semiotization of the symbolic'.<sup>49</sup> This 'semiotic network gives "music" to literature', as well as 'melody, harmony, rhythm', thus creating 'pleasing sounds'.<sup>50</sup> One could argue, then, that the symbolic is never more at risk from the semiotic than in opera where, according to Poizat, not only is the written word overwhelmed by the song, but the listener himself is 'stripped of all possibility of speech'.<sup>51</sup> For Poizat, this paralysis of the symbolic seems inescapably linked to the 'cry'. Lee, too, appears to connect strong emotional effects with this phenomenon. In *Belcaro* she remarks:

The most emotional thing ever written by Mozart is the exclamation of Donna Elvira, when, after leaving Don Giovanni at his ill-omened supper, she is met on the staircase by the statue of the commander; this exclamation is but one high, detached note, formless, meaningless, which pierces the nerves like a blade.<sup>52</sup>

Lee calls this exclamation a 'cry', a moment during which art has been subverted, the result of 'a momentary suspension of artistic activity', a transient return to formlessness and meaning-lessness which has inevitable associations with feminine fluidity and the infantile dependence and fusion that characterizes the preverbal relationship with the Mother and its attendant sensations of bliss and paranoia, of release and entrapment.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Frank, p. 44.

<sup>50</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 89-136, (p. 113); Julia Kristeva, *Polylogue* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1977), p. 73.

<sup>51</sup> Poizat, p. 199.

<sup>52</sup> Lee, 'Chapelmaster Kreisler', p. 123.

<sup>53</sup> Lee, 'Chapelmaster Kreisler', pp. 122-23.

## Dangerous Cries: The Medusa and the Castrato

Woman's song then is both beautiful and dangerous, pleasurable yet disturbing, descriptions which link the female voice irrevocably with its mythological embodiments for, as Charles Segal observes:

In its aural appeal and its power to dispel cares by its 'charm' ... the female voice also exercises magical power and seduction. The songs of the Sirens and of Circe in the *Odyssey* are the earliest and most famous examples. The Sirens would lure Odysseus off his course, end his voyage and leave him immobilized for death on an island full of the rotting bones and skins of those who succumbed to the magic ... [and] It is by the beauty of her song, too, that Circe lures the companions of Odysseus into her house before changing them into animals by the magic of her drugs.<sup>54</sup>

That the Sirens' song results in 'immobilization', and that Circe's is the cause of a return to an animalistic form of life appears to dramatize both the death-like paralysis indicated by Poizat and Lee, and a reversion to the pre-Oedipal life of the dependent child, responses which, in their texts, are evoked by the cry. Interestingly the word 'cry' which in both Poizat's and Lee's texts forms the culmination of the feminine voice and its disruptive power is itself linked to that terrifying image of motherhood, Medusa, for as Charles Segal explains, the name 'Gorgon' comes from the Indo-European root *garj*, meaning 'a fearful shriek, roar, or shout', combining a 'terrifying vocality with a demonic femaleness'.<sup>55</sup> The word 'cry' also seems of distinct significance to our 'hens that crow'

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<sup>54</sup> Charles Segal, 'The Gorgon and the Nightingale: the Voice of Female Lament and Pindar's Twelfth Pythian Ode', in *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*, ed. by Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 17-33, (pp. 17-18).

<sup>55</sup> Segal, pp. 18-19.

for 'to crow' is also 'to cry' suggesting that the savage reaction prompted by the figure of the vocal woman at the turn of the nineteenth century is deeply embedded in the mythological representation of a masculine fear.<sup>56</sup>

Like these transgressive females who violate the codes of feminine behaviour and suffer from social exclusion, Medusa lives in 'the shadowy border territory' situated 'at the extreme limit of Night', recalling also Chion's ambivalent maternal voice and its location in the 'uterine night'.<sup>57</sup> Decapitated by Perseus, Medusa gives birth to Pegasus from her headless trunk. This scene is, as Segal observes, a nightmare image of maternity, an image which associates her with 'night, immobility, serpentine monstrosity, and violent, bloody birth'.<sup>58</sup> In his critique of Freud's paper 'Medusa's Head', Phillip Slater suggests that rather than symbolizing a fear of castration at the sight of female genitalia, Medusa is more likely to represent a 'fear of maternal envelopment'.<sup>59</sup> It is of course possible that she may symbolize both for the comparability between the gorgonian cry and the voice of the powerful speaking woman raises the spectre of emasculation, and the identification of Medusa with immobilization and maternal engulfment has interesting implications for the disruptive quality of the feminine operatic voice posited by Poizat, and to Chion's psychoanalytic model of the mother's voice as a site of nightmarish entrapment.

Segal's essay traces the antitheses between Medusa and Athena, locating them in an opposition between the feminine and the masculine order of existence. Medusa, born of the primordial sea-divinities Phorkys and Keto, 'embodies flux, process, and

<sup>56</sup> *O.E.D.* 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

<sup>57</sup> Segal, p. 20.

<sup>58</sup> Segal, pp. 19-20.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Segal, p. 20.



animality', whereas Athena, 'sprung from the head of Zeus', is 'the most committed of the gods to the male-dominated order of Olympus' and ensures the 'invincibility of Zeus's patriarchal rule'.<sup>60</sup> Grounding his argument in Pindar's Twelfth Pythian Ode (490 BC), Segal notes the transmutation of 'the surviving Gorgons' wail of mourning' at their sister Medusa's death into 'the flute-song', a deed which 'is a cultural act that controls and aestheticizes': the 'cry' which issues from the gorgonian mouth is here transformed into 'a pleasing sound' that emanates from 'an artificial channel, the constricted passage of which produces the "many-headed melody" at all-male contests of art and athletics'.<sup>61</sup> Yet, perhaps the formidable female power of the Gorgon is not so easily suppressed. As Freud and others have noted, Athena wears the head of Medusa upon her dress and the flute is in itself no guarantee against the feminine chaos and disorder that the Gorgon embodies for, as Segal points out,

the flute's transformation from the Gorgons' wild, death-laden, liquid, and monstrous cry to an instrument of Athena's artistry is a figure for the incorporation of the otherness of female creative energy into the polis. Yet the flute's music, like the female in Greek myth, retains a certain mysterious power in its vacillation between the wild and the city, nature and culture.<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore, the ambiguity of flute music, 'emanating differently from each of the double reeds and stirring unruly emotions', suggests that the seductive and dangerous aspects of the female voice cannot be completely erased and thus threaten to disrupt Apollonian order through Dionysian excess.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Segal, p. 21.

<sup>61</sup> Segal, p. 23.

<sup>62</sup> Segal, p. 31.

<sup>63</sup> Segal, p. 31.

In her essay 'The Riddle of Music' Vernon Lee acknowledges that this disturbing duality exists in music: she writes 'why, from time immemorial, music has been considered sometimes as an art which enervates and demoralises, sometimes as one which disciplines, restrains and purifies'.<sup>64</sup> In *Belcaro* she expresses a preference for its latter qualities which manifest themselves where music 'exists as an art' and the very first step in the formation of that art is 'the subjection of the emotional cry or the spontaneous imitation to a process of acoustic mensuration'.<sup>65</sup> For Lee musical art is a process of regulation, an imposition of form on the unruly sounds of nature, 'for art begins' she observes, 'only where the physical elements are subjected to an intellectual process, and it exists completely only where they abdicate their independence and become subservient to an intellectual design'.<sup>66</sup> This insistence on regulation is perhaps best examined in the context of music's effect on the 'hearer' and the 'listener'. Lee argues that 'hearing' leads to a dangerous passivity, and demoralization, implicitly indicating corruption in contrast to 'listening' which imposes 'lucidity and order' through its active resistance.<sup>67</sup> Listening then becomes an intellectual discipline on the natural process of hearing; a triumph of art over nature that is comparable to the imposition of form on music which emerges from the primordial 'cry' for as Lee observes:

the physical elements, inasmuch as they are subdued and regulated and neutralized by one another in the intellectual form, are inevitably deprived of the full vigour of their emotional power; the artistic form has tamed and curbed them, has forbidden their freely influencing the nerves, while at the same time it- the form - has exerted

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<sup>64</sup> Vernon Lee, 'The Riddle of Music', *Quarterly Review* 204 (1906), 207-27, (p. 226).

<sup>65</sup> Lee, 'Chapelmaster Kreisler', p. 117.

<sup>66</sup> Lee, 'Chapelmaster Kreisler', p. 117.

<sup>67</sup> Lee, 'The Riddle of Music', p. 227.



its full sway over the mind. The mountains have been hewn into terraces, the forests have been clipped into gardens, the waves have been constrained into fountains ... nature has submitted to man, and has abdicated her power into his hands.<sup>68</sup>

Like the Gorgons' chthonian cry, emotion is here aestheticized via a man-made form, forcing and constraining the power of nature's voice through the regulated channels of Apollonian order. Amongst the various treatises concerning what she refers to as the 'art of singing' is Lee's essay, 'An Eighteenth-Century Singer: An Imaginary Portrait'. Here, the song has been stripped of its disorderly qualities and has become an art object in itself, 'The notes of the voice were the material, the paint or clay, in which the mind's conception must be embodied', and the breath the tool, the artist's brush or the sculptor's fingers which controls and shapes the final product:

It was by husbanding the breath, and employing it in a hundred different ways, that the singer shaped the component notes into a song; ... And, when he had thus modelled his song as the sculptor models, or as the painter prepares his cartoon in mere light and shade, it was with the breath again, now no longer a modelling tool, but rather a brush, that by varying and combining the various registers, movable differences in vocal quality, and the various *timbres* of his voice, and by giving different and infinite degrees of loudness and softness, that he put on the high lights, deepened the shadows, and varied the colouring of his marvellous pattern.<sup>69</sup>

Vernon Lee's partiality for eighteenth-century singing is well documented. In 'The Art of Singing, Past and Present' she tells us that 'by the end of the first quarter of the eighteenth century ... it had attained a degree of perfection absolutely analogous to the

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<sup>68</sup> Lee, 'Chapelmaster Kreisler', p. 122.

<sup>69</sup> Vernon Lee, 'An Eighteenth-Century Singer: An Imaginary Portrait', *Fortnightly Review*, o.s. 56, n.s. 50 (1891), 842-80, (p. 855).

perfection of sculpture among the Greeks, and of painting in the Renaissance' and compares this to the contemporary trend of composers like Wagner who have made 'a clean sweep of all musical perfection in singing in order to replace it by emotional declamation'.<sup>70</sup> Wagner's operatic song comes too close to the 'cry', it lacks the aesthetic orderliness of eighteenth-century music which 'aims mainly at exquisite delicacy of form'.<sup>71</sup>

It seems fitting that the singers who epitomized this art were themselves of 'man-made' construction for in the eighteenth century the castrato reigned supreme. First appearing in the Moorish courts in southern Spain and Portugal, the castrati became increasingly popular by the fifteenth century, singing at the court of Naples and in the papal chapel.<sup>72</sup> As the new opera form developed in the seventeenth century, castrati began to appear on the stage and by the eighteenth century, 'almost all the lead roles, male and female, were for high voices, and something like 70 percent of all male opera singers were castrati'.<sup>73</sup> The operation was normally carried out on boys between the ages of eight and ten, officially by hospitals for 'medical' reasons, unofficially by a variety of unscrupulous practitioners, including barbers. Castrati often came from modest backgrounds and were taken from willing parents who saw the musical conservatories as a step on the road to fame and fortune, that also brought the welcome relief of having one less mouth to feed at home.<sup>74</sup> Not all castrated children were able to fulfil their potential

<sup>70</sup> Vernon Lee, 'The Art of Singing, Past and Present', *British Quarterly Review*, 72 (1880), 322-42, (pp. 323, 339).

<sup>71</sup> Lee, 'The Art of Singing', p. 325.

<sup>72</sup> Margaret Reynolds, 'Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions', in *En Travesti: Women, Gender, Subversion, Opera*, ed. by Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 132-51, (p. 135).

<sup>73</sup> Reynolds, p. 137.

<sup>74</sup> Patrick Barbier, *The World of the Castrati: The History of an Extraordinary Operatic Phenomenon* trans. by Margaret Crossland (London: Souvenir Press), pp. 11-21.



but, for those that did, the reward was a potent castrato voice that was higher, lighter and more flexible than a man's, more brilliant and powerful than a woman's, and superior to the child's in its technique and expressivity.<sup>75</sup>

Through this 'manufactured' body came a voice that formed a trinity of voices; man, woman, and child, connoting the 'many-headed melody' that emerges from the 'artificial channel' of the Athenian flute, the castrato's asexual sound defamiliarizing the voice until it becomes 'more a musical instrument than a voice at all'.<sup>76</sup> Given Lee's need to aestheticize the cry in the relative safety of the musical instrument, it is hardly surprising that the operatic voice, which so precariously verges on the cry, should be especially acceptable when secured within the castrato.<sup>77</sup> Yet the figure of the castrato, like the flute, is laden with ambiguity. The larynx that produces his voice bears a feminine physiology; 'Modern scientific photographs of the singing larynx and glottis show us ... a lipped opening', and voice commentators 'describe the larynx as labial': an opening that mirrors both the vaginal wound of the castrated female and the genital severance that marks the castrato.<sup>78</sup> Moreover this sexual ambiguity extends to the roles acted by castrati on the operatic stage. Although often playing females, castrati were nevertheless for the most part 'assigned to eminently virile roles, like those of Caesar, Xerxes, and many other figures of masculine power'.<sup>79</sup> Yet these powerful male figures

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<sup>75</sup> Barbier, p. 17.

<sup>76</sup> Reynolds, p. 137.

<sup>77</sup> Interestingly, castrato and flute are 'merged' in the 'eunuch-flute', a type of mirliton, an instrument which is 'not a flute at all, but a tube covered at the small end with a thin membrane. The performer sings, or rather hums, through a hole in the side near the membrane'. See *O.E.D.*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

<sup>78</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Penguin, 1994), p. 160.

<sup>79</sup> Poizat, p. 197.



are emasculated by the castrato's body, for masculinity is here represented as artifice or castration.

The castrati's decline dates from the 1790s, 'by the 1810s and 1820s there was a dearth of singers, and by 1844 ... they were all but extinct'.<sup>80</sup> The chronological specificity of their ebbing popularity seems highly significant for as Margaret Reynolds observes:

This puts their demise at the same time as the period of the French Revolutionary and the Napoleonic wars ... During the intense European upheaval of this time, one of the things that increasingly worried contemporary arbiters of morals was that men were no longer men and women were no longer women. Strong women in the public eye (Mary Wollstonecraft, Madame de Staël) were demanding reforms and an equality of sex in the light of the new democracies ... And where there are strong women it follows that they must be emasculating their men.<sup>81</sup>

Confronting masculine order with its ultimate castration nightmare the castrato embodies not only the threat represented by the powerful speaking woman, but also her Medusan cry in his song with all its connotations of immobilization and entrapment. Paradoxically the castrato represents a figure of that disorder which Lee is so anxious to avoid in her writings on aesthetic musicality. In her supernatural fiction however, the castrato's ambiguity and the disruptive quality of his song become a source of power. Carlo Caballero notes this discrepancy and argues that her theoretical writing 'allowed her partially to neutralize the power of music by taking stock of it, disciplining its dangerous unreason with the intellectual word', whilst her fiction, and particularly her 'ghost stories

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<sup>80</sup> Reynolds, p. 139.

<sup>81</sup> Reynolds, p. 139.

... play out these powerful effects or put them on display'.<sup>82</sup> Here the 'vivid musical fantasies at play in her fiction speak for the concerns lurking in the rifts of her nonfiction, which willfully excluded anything that threatened to undermine her closed system "of differences" '.<sup>83</sup> It is this tension in Lee's writing and its manifestations through the voice that I intend to explore in her supernatural tales, 'Winthrop's Adventure' and 'A Wicked Voice', and in her drama, *Ariadne in Mantua*.

In her introduction to *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (1927), Vernon Lee explains her inspiration for these works. Exploring the Accademia Filarmonica in Bologna, Lee and her friend John Singer Sargent came upon a portrait of Carlo Broschi, known as Farinelli (1705-82), one of the great castrati of the eighteenth-century (fig. 1). This portrait exerted a strange fascination over the young and impressionable pair; Lee writes:

'mysterious, uncanny, a wizard, serpent, sphinx; strange, weird, *curious*.' Such ... were the adjectives, the comparisons, with which we capped each other, my friend John and I, as we lingered and fantasicated in front of that smoky canvas in an ill-lit lumber room, ... in the Bologna music-school, at closing-hour on autumn afternoons of the year 1872.<sup>84</sup>

A year or two later Lee wrote the initial version of 'A Culture Ghost, or Winthrop's Adventure' which proved to be the founding narrative for other texts, 'the various transformations of a single *leitmotiv*, the harmonic changes and altered instrumentation

<sup>82</sup> Carlo Caballero, ' "A Wicked Voice": On Vernon Lee, Wagner, and the effects of Music', *Victorian Studies*, 35 (1992), pp. 385-408, (p. 403).

<sup>83</sup> Caballero, p. 403.

<sup>84</sup> Vernon Lee, introduction to *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1927) pp. ix-li, (pp. xxx-xxxix).



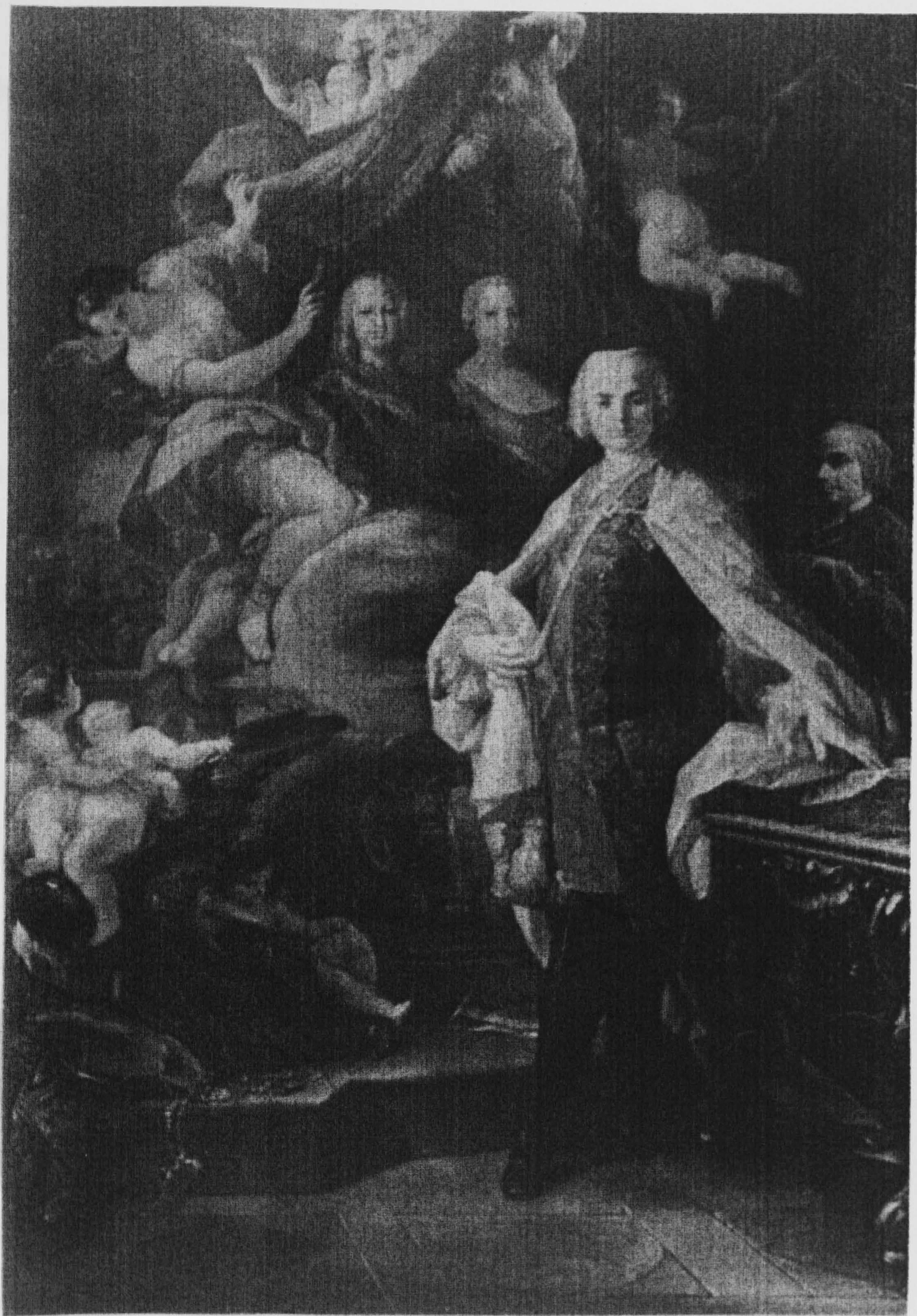


Fig. 1 Corrado Giaquinto, *Farinelli, Il Castrato*, Museo Civico Bibliografico Musicale, Bologna.



thereof' that developed into 'A Wicked Voice' and *Ariadne in Mantua*.<sup>85</sup>

### **'Winthrop's Adventure'**

'Winthrop's Adventure' concerns the experiences of an aspiring artist, Julian Winthrop, whose ominous reaction to the operatic air sung by his hostess at a social gathering excites curiosity and prompts Winthrop to relate the bizarre events which surrounded his first encounter with this disturbing piece of music. Told in flashback, Winthrop's tale traces the sequence of events which lead from first seeing the titled manuscript for the air in a portrait of the fictitious singer Rinaldi, to hearing the aria sung by Rinaldi's ghost in the now damp and dilapidated villa in which the singer was brutally murdered. In the third person narrative that frames his story, Winthrop's artistic talent is debated. Everyone agreed that 'this talent would never come to anything' (143). His endeavours are a series of seemingly unassociated images that merge into one another; 'acanthus leaves uncurling into sirens' tails, satyrs growing out of passion flowers [and] little Dutch manikins in tail coats and pigtails peeping out of tulip leaves under his whimsical pencil' (145). This unproductive style appears to have followed Winthrop's ghostly encounter for prior to that, during their tour of an old palace which holds a collection of musical memorabilia (including the fateful portrait), his artistic prowess encourages his cousin and companion to ask him for a water-colour sketch of a picture of Palestrina which adorned its walls. It is in this palace, in a small lumber-room at the end of a narrow corridor 'somewhere in the

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<sup>85</sup> Lee, introduction to *For Maurice*, p. xxxii. 'A Culture Ghost: Winthrop's Adventure' appeared in *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* as 'Winthrop's Adventure' pp. 143-205 and this is this version of the tale that I use throughout. All subsequent references will be made in the text.

heart of the building' that Winthrop first sees Rinaldi's portrait (158):

It was a half-length, life-size portrait of a man in the costume of the latter part of the last century ... The features were irregular and small, with intensely red lips and a crimson flush beneath the transparent bronzed skin ... The face was not beautiful; it had something at once sullen and effeminate, something odd and not entirely agreeable; yet it attracted and riveted your attention with its dark warm colour, rendered all the more striking for the light, pearly powdered locks, and the general lightness and haziness of touch (159-60).

Inexplicably haunted by the portrait, Winthrop returns the next day 'passing through the dark, wriggling lobby' into the room which holds the portrait (163). Upon close examination of the painting he discovers that Rinaldi 'was apparently singing, or rather about to sing, for the red, well-cut lips were parted; and in his hand he held an open roll of notes', the score which he later hears in such disturbing circumstances (163). Returning the following year Winthrop views the portrait for the last time:

I pushed open the door and entered; a long ray of the declining sunlight, reflected from the neighbouring red church tower, fell across the face of the portrait, playing in the light, powdered hair and on the downy, well-cut lips, and ending in a tremulous crimson stain on the boarded floor (178).

Lee never explicitly refers to Rinaldi as a castrato, yet Fa Diesis, the owner of the portrait, calls Rinaldi 'a very great singer' and dates his death as 1780, locating Rinaldi's fame at the height of the castrati's popularity (166). More subtle, but no less significant, are Rinaldi's perceived effeminacy and the intensely red lips that displace, and yet reflect the crimson stain that can only 'borrow' its colour from the phallic church tower, in a

metaphoric relationship that marks the source of the singer's power.<sup>86</sup> Spurred by his curiosity, Winthrop searches for the villa in which Rinaldi died, and on a rainy night amidst the revels of St John's Eve, he finally finds the 'gaunt, grey villa, with broken obelisks on its triangular front' (181). He spends the night in its vast ruined halls where 'the rain battered in through the unglazed windows and poured in a stream over some remains of tracery and fresco' (194). Through the 'dull falling rain' and the 'water splashing from the roof', Winthrop hears other sounds, the 'notes of some instrument' that 'proceeded from the interior of the house' (195-96). Working his way through dark, damp, and empty rooms, Winthrop arrives at the foot of a spiral staircase. Here the sounds are 'quite distinct, the light, sharp silvery sounds of a harpsichord or spinet' that 'fell clear and vibrating into the silence of the crypt-like house' (196). As he climbs the stairs he hears a chord 'and delicately, insensibly there glided into the modulations of the instrument the notes of a strange, exquisite voice': instrument and voice become one, eliciting a response that is both pleasurable and perturbing (196):

It was of a wondrous sweet, thick, downy quality, neither limpid nor penetrating, but with a vague, drowsy charm, that seemed to steep the soul in enervating bliss; but, together with this charm, a terrible cold seemed to sink into my heart (196-97).

In 'a large, lofty room, the greater part of which was hidden in darkness', Winthrop sees a figure in eighteenth-century dress wearing the clothes in which Rinaldi is pictured in his portrait. The passage which follows is worth quoting in full for it follows the voice's metamorphosis from musical instrument to primordial cry:

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<sup>86</sup> See also Caballero, p. 389.



He was singing intently, and accompanying himself on the harpsichord ... The wonderful sweet, downy voice glided lightly and dexterously through the complicated mazes of the song; it rounded off ornament after ornament, it swelled imperceptibly into glorious, hazy magnitude, and diminished, dying gently away from a high note to a lower one, like a weird, mysterious sigh; then it leaped into a high, clear triumphant note, and burst out into a rapid, luminous shake ... At that moment a shadow was interposed between me and the lights, and instantly, by whom or how I know not, they were extinguished, and the room left in complete darkness; at the same instant the modulation was broken off unfinished; the last notes of the piece changed into a long, shrill, quivering cry (197-98).

Arguably this transmutation of the voice is signalled earlier in the text. Like the maternal voice, Rinaldi's 'voice' is to be experienced in a figurative womb. The portrait in which his lips are open in a silent song is kept in a room at the heart of Fa Diesis' palace at the end of a 'dark wriggling passage' that connotes a vaginal channel. Similarly, his voice when actually heard emerges from the 'interior' of the 'crypt-like house'; a house of vast, dark, empty halls which drip with damp and harbour death, a uterine 'bath of sounds' that is simultaneously comforting and threatening, awash with a voice that, like Poizat's operatic cry, leads to a terrifying immobilization. Mesmerized, Winthrop's blood is frozen, and his limbs are 'paralysed' and 'almost insensible' (198). The emasculating power of this voice is clearly indicated; Winthrop's adventure takes place on St John's Eve, St John being John the Baptist whose decapitation at the hands of Salome implies a symbolic castration that is echoed in the broken obelisks that mark the entry to the fateful villa. Moreover, and more importantly perhaps, this castration manifests itself in Winthrop's waning creativity. As his hostess begins to sing he is in the process of sketching, his book littered with a strange combination of designs: sirens' tails that suggest his fear of the feminine voice, satyrs that seem to signify a triumph of Dionysian

chaos over Apollonian order, and ‘manikins’, diminutions which are perhaps symptomatic of his artistic impotence. These images coalesce, reflecting both the hybridity of the castrato voice, and the dissolution that marks his own ambiguous response to that voice. At the point at which the music enters his consciousness, Winthrop suddenly stops drawing. As in his first encounter with this song, which ends in a fruitless journey to Venice where he is laid low by a debilitating fever, Winthrop’s creativity is here suspended once more, paralyzed this time, by the sound of Rinaldi’s aria from the throat of his female host. Winthrop’s tale ends with the artist’s confession that Rinaldi’s air had become something of an obsession, that he had vainly attempted to trace its source until his failure to do so made him doubt ‘whether it had not been all a delusion, a nightmare phantasm, due to over-excitement and fever, due to the morbid, vague desire for something strange and supernatural’, prompting him to ask whether his experience is grounded in reality or fiction (204). His audience is unable to give an adequate reply, and Winthrop is left in limbo, knowing only that they ‘wouldn’t believe a word of it’ (205).

### **‘A Wicked Voice’**

Winthrop’s tale appeared in a more intricate and intriguing form as ‘A Wicked Voice’ in 1887.<sup>87</sup> Perhaps taking her cue from Winthrop’s own removal to Venice, Lee shifts the location to the Venetian lagoon where the castrato voice once more claims a victim who

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<sup>87</sup> ‘A Wicked Voice’ first appeared in French as ‘Voix Maudite’ in *Les Lettres et Les Arts* (1887). Vernon Lee, ‘A Wicked Voice’ in *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (London: Heinemann, 1890), pp. 195-237 is the version I use throughout. All subsequent references will be made in the text.

succumbs, like Winthrop, to a disabling fever. The protagonist here is Magnus, a nineteenth-century Norwegian composer who declares himself, ‘a follower of Wagner’ (196). Having arrived in Venice to compose his opera *Ogier the Dane*, which is Wagnerian in style and content, Magnus finds his inspiration flagging, his mind and body thrown into confusion by the stagnant Venetian waters that exhale ‘like some great lily, mysterious influences, which make the brain swim and the heart faint’ (197). During his stay at a Venetian boarding-house he is shown an engraving of a famous singer, Balthasar Cesari, known as Zaffirino, ‘because of a sapphire engraved with cabalistic signs presented to him one evening by a masked stranger ... that great cultivator of the human voice, the devil’ (199). A fellow boarder, Count Alvise, recounts how his great aunt, the Procuratessa Vendramin, had succumbed to the singer’s bewitching power, killed by the mere beauty of his mesmerizing voice. Haunted by the singer’s portrait and Count Alvise’s story, Magnus himself begins to hear the singer’s voice both in his dreams and in his waking hours, increasingly possessed by its beauty to the detriment of his own composition. Becoming progressively feverish and unstable, Magnus leaves Venice to stay at the Count’s home at Mistra where the Procuratessa had died. Here, in the very room where Zaffirino exerted his fatal magnetism, Magnus re-experiences the scene of death which has already contaminated his dreams, and is subsequently not only unable to complete his work, but is forever compelled to reproduce the eighteenth-century music that made Zaffirino’s voice famous, whilst denied the sound of the singer’s voice.

As in ‘Winthrop’s Adventure’, the word ‘castrato’ is never stated, but Zaffirino shares Rinaldi’s effeminacy whilst bearing a mark of cruel beauty which is lacking in the



latter. Describing the portrait, Magnus observes:

That effeminate, fat face of his is almost beautiful, with an odd smile, brazen and cruel. I have seen faces like this, if not in real life, at least in my boyish romantic dreams, when I read Swinburne and Baudelaire, the faces of wicked, vindictive women (206).

Zaffirino's voice is infected similarly with the decadent qualities of these dangerous *femmes fatales* for it has 'the same sort of beauty and the same expression of wickedness' (206). Later, it becomes clearer that Zaffirino is indeed a castrato for he has 'a man's voice which had much of a woman's, but more even of a chorister's, but a chorister's voice without its limpidity and innocence' (219).

Magnus first hears the singer's voice in his dreams where, reliving the scene of the Procuratessa's death, he finds himself in 'a real ballroom, almost circular in its octagon shape' (209). Gradually he begins to perceive sounds which draw his attention:

little, sharp, metallic, detached notes, like those of a mandoline[sic]; and there was united to them a voice, very low and sweet, almost a whisper, which grew and grew and grew, until the whole place was filled with that exquisite vibrating note, of a strange, exotic, unique quality. The note went on, swelling and swelling. Suddenly there was a horrible piercing shriek, and the thud of a body on the floor, and all manner of smothered exclamations (210).

As in 'Winthrop's Adventure', voice and instrument are here 'united'. Moreover, although our knowledge of the Procuratessa's story tells us that the shriek belongs to her, the passage does not make this clear and once again the song merges with the cry and its fatal consequences. At night, in search of inspiration, Magnus seeks the solitude of the

Venetian lagoon. Here, gently swaying ‘to and fro on the water’ whilst his gondola ‘rocked stationary’, Magnus hears Zaffirino’s voice once more (212-13):

Suddenly there came across the lagoon, cleaving, chequering, and fretting the silence with a lacework of sound even as the moon was fretting and cleaving the water, a ripple of music, a voice breaking itself in a shower of little scales and cadences and trills (213).

The sounds teasingly abate momentarily but begin again: the ‘murmur of a voice arose from the midst of the waters, a thread of sound slender as a moonbeam ... full, passionate, but veiled, as it were, in a subtle, downy wrapper’ (214). Emanating from incalculable points in threads forming a ‘lacework of sound’, Zaffirino’s voice connotes Chion’s maternal voice, forming an ‘umbilical net’ which surrounds Magnus as he sways in the amniotic fluidity of the Venetian waters (213). Yet the voice’s femininity, ‘wrapped in its downy wrapper’ masks an hermaphroditic phallicism: its note grows stronger and stronger until at last ‘it burst through that strange and charming veil, and emerged beaming, to break itself in the luminous facets of a wonderful shake, long, superb, triumphant’ (214-15).

In its final manifestation at Mistra where the Procuratessa’s death is replayed once again for Magnus’s conscious eyes, the composer is lured into a dark room where a brilliant light blinds him. He finds himself in a symbolically vaginal location, a ‘sort of dark hole with a high balustrade, half-hidden by an up-drawn curtain’ (232). Once again the voice becomes phallic:

I heard the voice swelling, swelling, rending asunder that downy veil which wrapped it, leaping forth clear, resplendent, like the sharp and glittering blade of a knife that seemed to enter deep into my breast. Then, once more, a wail, a death-groan, and that dreadful noise, that hideous gurgle of breath strangled by a rush of blood. And then a long shake, acute, brilliant, triumphant (235).

Penetrated by Zaffirino's voice which, like Donna Elvira's cry in Mozart's *Don Juan* 'pierces the nerves like a blade', Magnus is metaphorically emasculated and castrated for as Carlo Caballero points out, Magnus, 'will never again recover his "voice" as a composer'.<sup>88</sup> Not only is his creativity figuratively 'castrated', but his response to the voice is clearly marked by a form of feminine dissolution. Earlier in the tale, succumbing to the voice in the acoustic splendour of an empty church, Magnus writes:

my hair was clammy, my knees sank beneath me, an enervating heat spread through my body; I tried to breathe more largely, to suck in the sounds with the incense-laden air. I was supremely happy, and yet as if I were dying (225).

Later, at Mistra, this 'petit mort' becomes even more explicit. Hearing the voice as it 'wound and unwound itself in long, languishing phrases, in rich, voluptuous *riflorituras*', Magnus feels his body melting 'even as wax in the sunshine' and it seems as though he, too, is 'turning fluid and vaporous, in order to mingle with these sounds as the moonbeams mingled with the dew' (234). Magnus is doubly feminized: his desire for the 'male' singer cannot but be tinged with homoeroticism, and the fluidity of his orgasmic sensations define him as feminine.

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<sup>88</sup> Caballero, p. 391



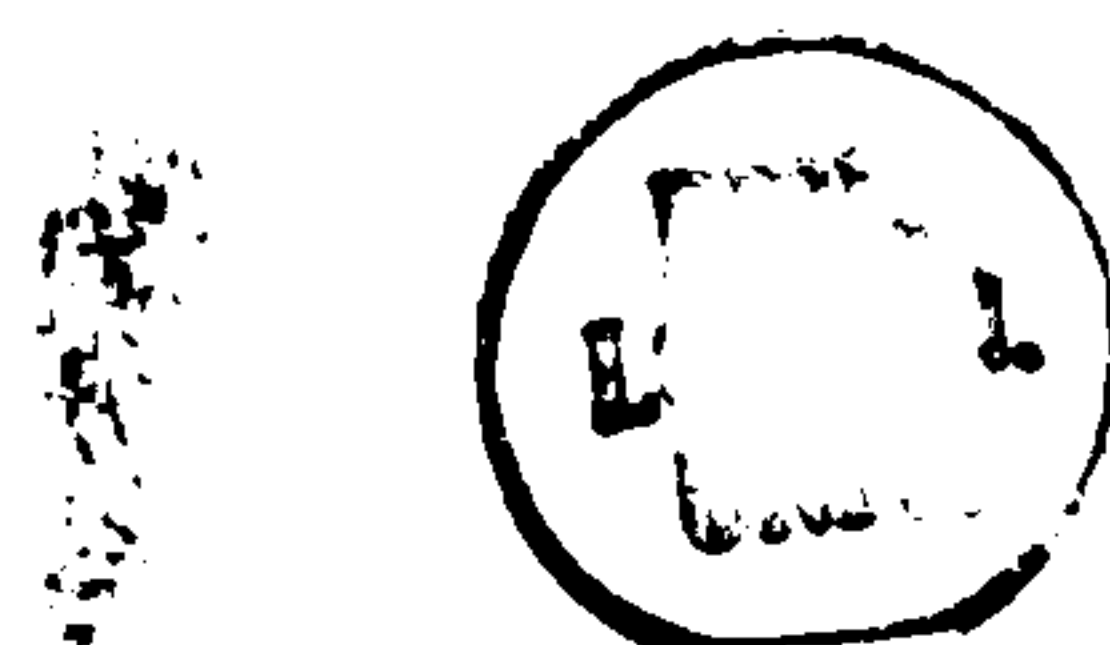
Yet perhaps the voice's most threatening quality is its androgyny, for it is this hybridity which links its power to the threatening female voices of the past. Emerging from, and aligned with the undulating waters of the Venetian Lagoon, Zaffirino becomes synonymous with Venice herself, whose soubriquet, 'La Serenissima' is pregnant with meaning, for the word 'serene' from which 'serenissima' is constructed, (as well as meaning 'calm'), is also an obsolete form of 'siren'.<sup>89</sup> Like Zaffirino, the siren, too, is a hybrid being, 'half bird, half woman' who enchants, and raises 'the voices of the dead, to bring the past to life in the present'.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, a 'siren' was also once known as 'an imaginary species of serpent', a mythological beast that has obvious connotations with Medusa: an association which is heightened by the maternal fluidity of Zaffirino's voice and echoed in the serpentine waters of Venice, which paradoxically immobilize Magnus in a state of fluid suspension between bliss and paranoia.<sup>91</sup> Significantly, the 'siren' was also an acoustical instrument invented by Cagniard de la Tour in 1819, which produced musical tones and was used in numbering the vibrations in any note, and it seems that here, in 'A Wicked Voice', the Apollonian instrument of Lee's ideal reverts significantly to 'a violin of flesh and blood', that recalls not only the bloody monstrosity of Medusa's maternity, but also the disturbing quality of the gorgonian cry.<sup>92</sup> Aligned with the threatening femininity of the past, and the phallic and disturbing contemporary *femmes fatales* from the pages of Swinburne and Baudelaire, Zaffirino symbolizes a menacing femininity that remains tinged with an ambivalent sexuality.

<sup>89</sup> *O.E.D.* 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989)

<sup>90</sup> Barbara Engh, 'Adorno and the Sirens: tele-phono-graphic bodies', in *Embodied Voices*, pp. 120-35, (p. 134).

<sup>91</sup> *O.E.D.* 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

<sup>92</sup> *O.E.D.* 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).



## ‘Sarrasine’

As Carlo Caballero has observed, Lee’s tales form a relationship with Balzac’s ‘Sarrasine’ (1832), which is now perhaps best known as the novella which Roland Barthes analyzes in his seminal work, *S/Z*.<sup>93</sup> Balzac’s tale, like Lee’s, is fraught with sexual ambiguity and desire. Like Winthrop and Magnus, Sarrasine is an artist, a sculptor. Arriving in Rome ‘filled with desire to carve his name between Michaelangelo’s’ and that of M. Bouchardon (his former master), Sarrasine is one night drawn to the opera. Here, his senses are ‘lubricated’, and the voices plunge him ‘into a delicious ecstasy’ which renders him ‘speechless, motionless’ (237). As the singer, Zambinella, takes centre stage Sarrasine’s excitement is heightened and he cries out with pleasure. In Zambinella the sculptor’s gaze finds his ideal beauty for she ‘displayed to him, united, living, and delicate, those exquisite female forms he so ardently desired’ (238). Her physical perfection is matched by the beauty of her song and elicits a rapture of desire:

When La Zambinella sang, the effect was delirium. The artist felt cold; then he felt a heat which suddenly began to prick in the innermost depth of his being, in what we call the heart, for lack of any other word! ... he experienced an impulse of madness, a kind of frenzy ... Fame, knowledge, future, existence, laurels, everything collapsed (238).

The singer’s voice, ‘fresh and silvery in timbre, supple as a thread shaped by the slightest breath of air, rolling and unrolling, cascading and scattering’ assaults his body with an orgy of sensations which overwhelms him and provokes ‘involuntary cries torn from

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<sup>93</sup> Honoré de Balzac, ‘Sarrasine’, in Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 221-254 is the version I use throughout. All subsequent references will appear in the text.

him by convulsive feelings of pleasure' (239). Exhausted, Sarrasine is obliged to leave the theatre:

His trembling legs almost refused to support him. He was limp, weak ... He had experienced such pleasure, or perhaps he had suffered so keenly, that his life had drained away like water from a broken vase. He felt empty inside, a prostration similar to the debilitation that overcomes those convalescing from serious illness (239).

Love-stricken, Sarrasine returns night after night to his box at the opera, and eventually his diligence and faithfulness are rewarded when he is invited to attend a supper with Zambinella. On arrival he is disappointed to find that he is not the only guest. However, during the course of the evening, drunk with wine and with lust, Sarrasine sweeps Zambinella off her feet, carrying her into a private boudoir. Here, Zambinella draws a dagger, ostensibly to protect her virtue, secretly to prevent Sarrasine's discovery of the truth behind her voice. Zambinella escapes, briefly, but after several days of coquettish evasion, Sarrasine's ardour is at its peak and he resolves to kidnap the singer. His plans are thwarted, however, when he attends a private concert. Here, he finds Zambinella, this time dressed 'like a man' wearing 'a snood, kinky hair, and a sword' and at last is told the truth, that the singer is a castrato. As in Lee's tales, Balzac shies away from the word itself. Instead the nobleman who illuminates Sarrasine asks 'Has there ever been a woman on the Roman stage? And don't you know about the creatures who sing female roles in the Papal States?' leaving Sarrasine and the reader to draw their own conclusions (250). This, together with the excellence of Zambinella's voice and the other clues that litter



Balzac's text can leave no doubt about the singer's sexuality. Sarrasine, however, is more difficult to convince. Unable to accept the evidence of his eyes and his ears, he proceeds with the kidnapping plot and has Zambinella brought to his studio where he has been working on a sculpture in her image. When the truth is finally revealed, the implications of Zambinella's deception on Sarrasine's talent are made explicit. Looking at the statue Sarrasine exclaims in despair:

I shall forever think of this imaginary woman when I see a real woman ... I shall always have the memory of a celestial harpy who thrust its talons into all my manly feelings, and who will stamp all other women with a seal of imperfection! Monster! You who can give life to nothing. For me, you have wiped women from the earth (252).

At this point he raises his sword to kill Zambinella, but her protectors come to the rescue. Sarrasine is himself murdered 'stabbed by three stiletto thrusts' (252).

The pattern is by now familiar; the male artist is enthralled by a feminine voice, a voice which evokes both pleasure and pain, an obsession which terminates in an artist's metaphorical castration, and for Sarrasine, in death. For Barthes, this voice is essentially phallic, its 'lubrication' of the hearer's faculties is linked to its 'seminal fluid' which 'floods with pleasure' as it diffuses through the pores of Sarrasine's body.<sup>94</sup> However, as Felicia Miller Frank points out, 'there is nothing necessarily masculine about the qualities of "lubrication" and "diffusion" which could apply equally well to sexual qualities that are specifically feminine'.<sup>95</sup> For Frank, the interest that lies behind Zambinella's voice is its duality, its hermaphroditism. Yet, this duality is eschewed in both Barthes' and

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<sup>94</sup> Barthes, p. 110

<sup>95</sup> Frank, p. 105

Balzac's texts. In the former, as we have seen, it is phallicized and in the latter it is arguably negated entirely for, although Zambinella can 'give birth' to a voice, Sarrasine states that she 'can give life to nothing' (252). Written in 1832, during a period which, as Margaret Reynolds observes, was fraught with sexual anxieties which contributed to the devaluation of the castrato, Balzac's tale nevertheless resonates with the voice's androgyny. Its 'femininity' is encased in a woman's form, Zambinella, and its affective quality is linked to both the female operatic voice that immobilizes the hearer, and to the maternal voice - for Sarrasine's responses of orgasmic bliss and 'a moral depression impossible to explain' as he listens to the silvery web-like threads of the singer's voice, are results of an experience that takes place in a darkened auditorium that is reminiscent of the womb. Moreover, Zambinella is described as a celestial 'harpy', a figure that bears a horrific female face and the body of a vulture, connoting the half-woman, half-bird physiology of her equally dangerous mythical sister the siren. Yet Zambinella is also metaphorically masculine; she is a phallic woman carrying a dagger to belie her sexuality, and her 'fatal beauty' foreshadows the decadent women Magnus will later find hidden in the cruelty of Zaffirino's face and voice. Stabbed by stilettos, Sarrasine's death is perhaps fitting: a 'castration' of life that is effected by the 'little knife', the colloquial expression for the castrative operation, and by its symbolic counterpart the 'little phallus' that marked the castrato's often stunted genitalia. Despite their similarities the significant difference that separates Balzac's tale from those of Lee is the castrato's body. Balzac chooses to mask the castrato's body in the female form. More specifically this form is an ideal, Pygmalion's Galatea, an artistic perfection that is a fetishized



idealization of femininity, a form which contains and controls the contaminating and dangerous fluidity of the female body including the voice. In 'Sarrasine' it is only when the castrato's body is exposed that it becomes truly dangerous for the threats it embodies no longer remain implicit.

### **Ariadne in Mantua**

Lee's own cross-dressed and star-crossed lover appears in her play *Ariadne in Mantua* as a woman who adopts male attire in order to be close to her love, the Duke Ferdinand of Mantua.<sup>96</sup> Taking her inspiration once again from Farinelli, whose sojourn in the court of Spain had given rise to a legend that his voice had cured the King of Spain's melancholy madness, Lee transposes this castrato voice onto the page Diego, a 'most expert singer' who has been summoned to the Mantuan court to cure the young duke of his melancholia so that he may marry his cousin Hippolyta.<sup>97</sup> Diego is actually Magdalen, a Venetian courtesan and the duke's former lover who facilitated his escape from captivity at the

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<sup>96</sup> Vernon Lee, *Ariadne in Mantua* (Oxford:Blackwell, 1903) . I use this edition throughout. All subsequent references will appear in the text. Lee visited Mantua for the first time in 1896 and was struck by the beauty of its lakes and returned several times (see *Genius Loci: Notes on Places* (1899)). For background information to the origin of the play, including historical personages who may have inspired Duke Ferdinand and Diego, see Ermanno F. Comparetti, 'A Note on the Origin of *Ariadne in Mantua*', *Colby Library Quarterly*, 3, (1954), 226-29, and Rita Severi, introduction to Vernon Lee, *Ariadne in Mantua* (Mantova: Fondazione Marcegaglia, Gazoldo degli Ippoliti, 1996), pp. 10-39. Peter Gunn informs us that the play was performed on two occasions: 'In May 1916, the Countess Lytton produced *Ariadne* at the Gaiety Theatre, with Viola Tree as Diego-Magdalen, [and] Ben Webster as the Duke ... and Gladys Cooper as Hippolyta. The Music was by Eugene Goossens and Ivor Novello. The only other production was that by Signora Flavia Farina Cini in Florence in 1934' (p. 180). According to Ethel Smyth, the latter was performed in Italian, and was originally intended to take place in the Boboli Gardens. Whether this plan came to fruition is uncertain. From Smyth's autobiography, *As Time Went On* (London: Longmans, 1936), we know only that *Ariadne* took place in the 'wonderful garden' of a Florentine friend of Lee's (p. 249), and in *Maurice Baring* (London: Heinemann, 1938), she notes that it 'made a deep impression' on Lee who, although now too deaf to hear, 'followed the performance with a printed copy in her hand'(p. 335).

<sup>97</sup> Lee, *Ariadne in Mantua*, p. 15.



hands of the Infidels. A love triangle ensues in which Hippolyta is attracted to Diego, Diego is in love with the duke, and the duke develops a homoerotically charged affection for his page whilst lamenting his lost love, Magdalen. In the last scene Magdalen as Diego plays the part of Ariadne on a floating stage amidst the waters of the lake that surrounds the duke's palace. Having sung her final song, Magdalen drowns herself in the lake, and the duke and Hippolyta finally learn the secret of her sexuality.

The action takes place 'during the reign of Prospero I of Milan, and shortly before the Venetian expedition to Cyprus under Othello' highlighting the play's Shakespearian associations that are acknowledged by Lee in the epigraph from *Twelfth Night* which precedes the first act, thus locating the play's use of cross-dressing and sexual ambivalence firmly within the tradition of Elizabethan theatre (12). Whilst indubitably playing with the erotic tensions of Elizabethan drama, one must not forget that *Ariadne in Mantua* evolved from Lee's attraction to the castrato figure and, significantly, the drama is propelled by the power and effect of Diego's voice. Moreover, the importance of this sexually ambivalent singing voice, and the cross-dressed body from which it emerges forces obvious connections with eighteenth-century opera and the transexual figure of the castrato who plays both male and female parts and sings in a voice that eerily encompasses the tones of man, woman, and boy. Supposedly 'a Spaniard of Moorish descent', Diego's assumed nationality also indicates that his voice is the product of castration, for as one of his admirers, the Bishop of Cremona remarks in the final act (15):

A wondrous singer, your Signor Diego. They say the Spaniards have subtle exercises for keeping the voice thus youthful. His Holiness has several such who

sing divinely under Pier-Luigi's guidance (57).

If we consider that the castrati first appeared in the Moorish courts of southern Spain, and were later employed in the papal chapel, the insinuation is clear.

The indeterminate nature of Diego's sexuality is complicated even further, for Diego is not only a cross-dressed woman, but that woman is Magdalen, one of the many Venetian courtesans who were well-known for their propensity to wear breeches beneath their skirts and who presented themselves as enticing hybrids of boy and woman.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, in the context of the Elizabethan stage this female figure would have been played by a boy whose hybridity was perceived as dangerous, particularly so when it emerged in song for it was:

the combination of boy actresses' erotic, costumed beauty with the seductive love-songs that their roles often required which made theatrical music so dangerous to the listener, their songs the deadly songs of Sirens.<sup>99</sup>

The boy actor here becomes inevitably linked with the eighteenth-century castrato, for it is the sexual ambivalence of the voice that presents a threat to its audience. Moreover the siren-like quality of this voice is heightened in *Ariadne in Mantua* for, like Zaffirino, the Venetian courtesan bewitches her listeners with the power of her vocal and musical dexterity. In a passage from *Coryats Crudities* (1611), the famous Jacobean traveller, Thomas Coryat analyzes her skill and warns of her charms:

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<sup>98</sup> Linda Phyllis Astern, ' "No women are indeed": The Boy Actor as Vocal Seductress in late Sixteenth- and Early Seventeenth-Century English Drama', in *Embodied Voices*, pp. 83-102, (p. 92).

<sup>99</sup> Astern, p. 89



Shee will endeavour to enchant thee partly with her melodious notes that shee warbles out upon her lute, which shee fingers with as laudable a stroake as many men that are excellent professors in the noble science of Musicke: and partly with the heart-tempting harmony of her voice.<sup>100</sup>

Transgressing the boundaries of masculine artistry the courtesan is scarcely differentiated from her lute, the threatening femininity of her voice is encased, melding imperceptibly with the Apollonian instrument which accompanies her. Alternatively, as in *Ariadne in Mantua*, the courtesan's voice is submerged in and contained by her body so that she herself becomes an art object. Speaking to Diego of Magdalen, the duke tells him:

She was like music, - the whole art: new modes, new melodies, new rhythms, with every day and hour, passionate or sad, or gay, or very quiet; more wondrous notes than in thy voice; and more strangely sweet, even when they grated, than the tone of those new-fangled fiddles, which wound the ear and pour balm in, they make now at Cremona (39).

Recalling the strange, sweet voices once heard by Lee at St Peter's in Rome, Magdalen's voice cuts the soul, 'only to pour into the wound some mysterious, narcotic balm'.<sup>101</sup> Yet the threatening quality of that cut requires that her voice, like Zambinella's, be bound by art, confined by the aestheticized female body. Lee's text suggests that Diego's voice, too, must be contained. Having discovered Diego's secret and perhaps fearing the emasculating effects of his hybridity, the duke's cardinal bids him be 'merely a singer: a sexless creature' (18). Unlike the synthetically formed voice of the castrato, Diego's is interpreted as a miracle of Heaven, yet like the former, it is merely an instrument in which, 'sounds, subtly linked, take wondrous powers from the soul of him who frames

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<sup>100</sup> Quoted in Astern, p. 93

<sup>101</sup> Quoted in Gunn, p. 38

their patterns; and we, who sing, are merely ... as the reed through which he blows' (22).

Magdalen's siren song is ostensibly made 'safe', sanitized and contained within the Apollonian mechanism of Diego's body that recalls the Athenian flute. At the same time, the disturbing ambiguity of this human 'flute' is acknowledged. Diego is simultaneously comforting and disconcerting, 'having seen passion but never felt it' he is 'yet capable ... of rousing and soothing it in others' with his voice (18).

In Act IV, the disruptive nature of Diego's voice is revealed during a duet which he sings with Hippolyta. The Princess begins singing in a 'full-toned voice clear and high', and Diego follows, 'singing in a whisper' in a voice that is 'a little husky, and here and there broken, but ineffably delicious and penetrating, and, as he sings, becomes, without quitting the whisper, dominating and disquieting' (54). Disturbed and distracted the Princess 'plays a wrong chord, and breaks off suddenly' (54). Diego asks the cause of her distress and Hippolyta answers disjointedly :

I know not. I have lost my place - I - I feel bewildered. When your voice rose up against mine, Diego, I lost my head. And - I do not know how to express it - when our voices met in that held dissonance, it seemed as if you hurt me - horribly (54).

Like Zaffirino's voice, Diego's is both phallically penetrant and femininely disruptive. Hippolyta, whose body it 'penetrates' and whose art it disrupts, has masculine attributes. She has the 'strength and grace, and the candour, rather of a beautiful boy than of a woman', her brows 'are wide and straight, like a man's', her voice is 'more like a boy's' than a maiden's and she has been brought up by her father 'in such



a wise as scarcely to lack a son, with manly disciplines of mind and body' (43-55).

Hippolyta's 'masculinity' is threatened by Diego's voice. Like the male artists we have already met, her art, too, is cut short, metaphorically castrated, by the elusive ambiguity of Diego's song that combines the phallic power of the 'mannish' woman, the dangerous hybridity of the Siren's vocality, and the simultaneously soothing and disturbing attributes of the maternal voice. Yet Hippolyta is herself a 'mannish' woman who is named after the queen of the Amazons, a race of virginal women, 'unlike their vain and weakly sex' (44). Why then is Diego able to exert his power over her voice? The answer may lie in Hippolyta's female body whose Amazonian virginity remains intact despite being symbolically penetrated by Diego - an expert 'player on the virginal' - with his hermaphroditic voice (15). The scene suggests a fantasy of lesbian desire, that ends in 'dissonance', or disharmony, and is played out within an ostensibly heterosexual coupling, for Hippolyta's voice is 'like a boy's' and Diego's 'like a woman's' while still retaining a thread of erotic ambiguity in its sexual reversals.

In the final act of the drama, Diego plays the mythological figure Ariadne in a masque that is performed to celebrate the marriage of the Duke to Hippolyta. Having helped Theseus to evade the Minotaur by means of a thread that leads him out of the Cretan labyrinth, Ariadne is then abandoned on the island of Naxos, whilst her lover proceeds to marry the young duchess's namesake, Hippolyta. It is here on Naxos that Ariadne is wooed by Bacchus whom she rejects, pleading to be allowed time to lament her lost love. The figure of Ariadne functions as an allusion to the duke's personal device, a labyrinth, which is carved in gold on the deep blue ground of the music room ceiling and

inscribed with the words *Rectas Peto*, meaning ‘I seek straight ways’ (33). Earlier in the play, the duke explains its meaning:

The maze, Diego, carved and gilded on that ceiling is but a symbol of my former life ... When I entered it, I was a raw youth, although in years a man; full of easy theory, and thinking all practice simple; unconscious of passion; ready to govern the world with a few learned notions; moreover never having known either happiness or grief, never loved and wondered at a creature different from myself ... The maze, and all the maze implied, made me a man (33).

But the maze, as Diego observes, is symbolic also of the reality of the duke’s former imprisonment at the hands of the Infidels, from which he escapes with Magdalen’s assistance; Magdalen, like Ariadne, having provided a clue, or ‘thread’ by which he might achieve his freedom. The music room, whose ceiling bears the labyrinthine carving, has windows on both sides ‘admitting a view of the lake, so that the hall looks like a galley surrounded by water’, a room which paradoxically seems to function as a locus of release and entrapment (43). Here, the duke has engraved his symbol of freedom and emergence into manhood, and it is also the place in which Magdalen, as Diego, liberates him once more from the labyrinth of his melancholy. For Hippolyta, however, it is a site of confinement for it is here that her song is stifled and her voice silenced: contradictory effects, recalling those created by Chion’s maternal vocality, this time produced by Diego’s voice in the music room surrounded by the uterine fluidity of the Mantuan lake.

Amidst a stage peopled by Bacchanalian figures, Satyrs and Nymphs, Ariadne appears, dressed in ‘a floating robe and vest of orange and violet ... with particoloured scarves hanging, and a particoloured scarf wound like a turban round the head, the locks of



dark hair escaping from beneath' (60). Ariadne speaks accompanied by viols and harpsichord. As her speech becomes more dramatic, her declamation is echoed by 'a rapid and passionate tremolo of violins and viols' (62). The accompaniment becomes more and more agitated until at last she sings, and as her song ends she flings herself into the waters of the lake as a 'hautboy suddenly enters with a long wailing phrase' (64). In this scene of Dionysian excess Ariadne sings in garments that symbolize the disruptive quality of her voice, her particoloured dress suggests her hybridity, her Medusan locks escape threateningly from the serpentine scarves that drape her hair. Yet her singing voice is effectively 'silenced', allowed only to speak whilst the flute, the viol, or the harpsichord echo her emotions, culminating in the hautboy's mournful wail that displaces the gorgonian cry of mourning. The threatening nature of her voice manifests itself only at the point of death, as she drowns herself in the lake which, in its sunset colours, mirrors the deep blue and gold of the labyrinthine pattern that adorns the duke's music room. Ariadne, led by the thread of her own song, dies engulfed by the maternal liquidity of the Mantuan waters.

### **Inverted Images and Acoustic Mirrors**

At the heart of Lee's supernatural tales, 'Winthrop's Adventure' and 'A Wicked Voice', as in Balzac's *Sarrasine*, lies the theme of the thwarted artist. Winthrop is unable to complete any sketch he begins, Magnus can no longer compose what he chooses, and Sarrasine's sculpture of Zambinella is nothing but a cruel illusion, a mockery of his artistic

vision. As we have seen, in all three tales the cause of this disruption is the castrato. In Balzac's story, the castrato's dangerous voice and physical deformity are safely hidden in the feminine curves of Zambinella's body. When the castrato body is finally exposed, the artist's inspiration becomes void, both literally and figuratively, for Zambinella lacks what a woman's body should have, and hides a 'void', the castration wound, which is mirrored in the artist's castrated creativity. One could argue, then, that Zambinella and Sarrasine are mirror images for, as Barthes observes, 'S and Z are in a relation of graphological inversion: the same letter seen from the other side of the mirror'.<sup>102</sup> Although Barthes contends that it is Zambinella's voice with which Sarrasine falls in love, Balzac's text suggests otherwise, for it is Zambinella's physical attributes that first attract him:

Her mouth was expressive, her eyes loving, her complexion dazzlingly white. And along with these details, which would have enraptured a painter, were all the wonders of those images of Venus revered and rendered by the chisels of the Greeks ... This was more than a woman, this was a masterpiece! (238).

Zambinella is 'Pygmalion's statue, come down from its pedestal', locating her in a tradition of woman as object, of woman as a reassuring mirror to the male gaze (238).

Although it is certainly true, that Sarrasine responds sexually to Zambinella's voice, that voice is nevertheless already contained by the exquisite aesthetic form of her physical body. This effectively 'silences' Zambinella's voice and displaces the threat implicit in the castrato's voice onto the body that is later exposed with such fatal effects. In contrast Lee's tales centre on the voice. Rinaldi's portrait depicts him with open lips in the process of singing and the engraving of Zaffirino prompts the young ladies at

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<sup>102</sup> Barthes, p. 107.



Magnus's boarding-house to ask the young composer to sing one of Zaffirino's favourite songs, so that Magnus momentarily 'becomes' Zaffirino. It is open to question whether the ghostly manifestations of these voices are heard by anyone other than the artists themselves. During one of Magnus's nocturnal excursions a mystery voice is apparently heard not just by himself but by others. Yet the voice emerges seemingly from the waters of the Grand Canal where a music-boat is providing entertainment for the people who grace the balconies of the neighbouring hotels, and it is never clear whether the voice heard by Magnus is that which is also heard by others. As in 'Winthrop's Adventure', it is therefore debatable whether the source of the voice is internal or external.

The spatial indeterminacy of this voice has interesting implications. Winthrop and Magnus, like Sarrasine, respond erotically to the castrato voice, but in Lee's tales the castrato body is aurally, if not physically explicit: its sexuality is disembodied by its ghostliness, displaced and made to 'lodge in the throat'.<sup>103</sup> If Sarrasine falls in love with Zambinella's body before he falls in love with her voice, Winthrop and Magnus have no such option. The locus of their desire is the voice itself. In his essay 'On Love', Shelley suggests that the self 'thirsts after its likeness'.<sup>104</sup> If this is the case then one might argue that the voice which haunts the artists in Lee's tales is, in fact, a facet of their own, an auditory image which functions as an 'acoustic mirror' that is potentially disruptive to their subjectivity, for as Guy Rosolato observes:

The voice [has the property] of being at the same time emitted and heard, sent and received, and by the subject himself, as if, in comparison with the look, an

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<sup>103</sup> Barthes, p. 109

<sup>104</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'On Love', in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), pp. 473-74, (p. 473).

‘acoustic’ mirror were always in effect. Thus the images of entry and departure relative to the body are narrowly articulated. They can come to be confounded, inverted, to prevail one over the other.<sup>105</sup>

Kaja Silverman notes that the ‘notion of an “acoustic mirror” can be applied with remarkable precision to the function which the female voice is called upon to perform for the male subject’.<sup>106</sup> Silverman points out that within ‘the traditional familial paradigm, the maternal voice introduces the child to its mirror reflection’.<sup>107</sup> Not only does the child learn to speak by imitating the mother’s sounds, but even before its entry into language the maternal voice plays a major part in the development of the child’s subjectivity. It is ‘generally the first object not only to be isolated, but to be introjected’.<sup>108</sup> Silverman points out that in this early period of a child’s development:

the object has as yet no externality, since it is no sooner identified than it is assimilated by the child. Nor, since the subject lacks boundaries, does it as yet have anything approximating an interiority ... Since the child’s economy is organized around incorporation, and since what is incorporated is the auditory field articulated by the maternal voice, the child could be said to hear itself initially through that voice - to first ‘recognize’ itself in the vocal ‘mirror’ supplied by the mother.<sup>109</sup>

Silverman goes on to argue that ‘the male subject later hears the maternal voice through himself - that it comes to resonate for him with all that he transcends through language ... projecting onto the mother’s voice all that is unassimilable to the paternal position’.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Silverman, p. 79.

<sup>106</sup> Silverman, p. 80.

<sup>107</sup> Silverman, p. 80.

<sup>108</sup> Silverman, p. 80.

<sup>109</sup> Silverman, p. 80.

<sup>110</sup> Silverman, p. 81.



So how do Winthrop and Magnus function within this scenario? As I have illustrated, the castrato voice appears to embody both the comforting and disturbing qualities of the maternal voice, whilst simultaneously aestheticizing and projecting the emasculating threat represented by the powerful speaking woman and her Medusan cry. Vernon Lee, like many of her female contemporaries, and writers like George Eliot before her, was aware of the need to reject the feminine voice in order to be taken seriously by the male literary establishment. Whilst regretting that most female novelists had embraced the idea of ‘imitating men’s cuffs and collars and documents’ instead of exploring the world from the female consciousness, Lee was often guilty of this herself.<sup>111</sup> Like Eliot, Lee retained her ‘male’ pseudonym throughout her literary career and is listed amongst the small number of female contributors writing non-fiction prose for the leading periodicals which served as the principal venue for what has come to be known as ‘sage writing’.<sup>112</sup> This genre was dominated by writers such as Carlyle, whose lecture, ‘The Hero as Man of Letters’ forms what Carol T. Christ calls ‘the paradigmatic Victorian text which establishes the ideal of the writer as prophet, priest, or sage’ and ‘defines that role as exclusively male’.<sup>113</sup> It was in these periodicals that many of Lee’s articles on musical aesthetics were published and it is perhaps, therefore, unsurprising that her work in this field should be characterized, as we have seen, by a rejection of the feminine and a penchant for Apollonian form and order. But like Athena, that ‘figure for the

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<sup>111</sup> Gunn, p. 9.

<sup>112</sup> Carol T. Christ, ‘“The Hero as Man of Letters”: Masculinity and Victorian Nonfiction Prose’, in *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse*, ed. by Thais E. Morgan (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 19-31, (p. 22).

<sup>113</sup> Christ, ‘The Hero as Man of Letters’, p. 20. As Phyllis Mannocchi has observed, Lee’s own role in the literary arena was ‘based on the original image of the man of letters’. See, Phyllis F. Mannocchi, ‘Vernon Lee and Kit Anstruther-Thomson: A Study of Love and Collaboration between Romantic Friends’, *Women’s Studies*, 12, (1986), 129-48, (p. 130).

incorporation of the otherness of female creative energy into the polis', who bears the head of Medusa on her dress, Lee's theoretical work carries within it traces of Medusa's threatening femininity which emerge in the contradictions of her factitious aesthetic system and are then refracted through her fiction.<sup>114</sup> The increasing feminization of the voice in that fiction, which can be traced in a clear trajectory from Rinaldi, through Zaffirino, and finally to Magdalen-Diego in *Ariadne in Mantua*, might suggest that in Magdalen, who must appear a man even when she plays Ariadne, Lee expresses her frustration with the male persona she maintains in order to achieve success in the critical world. As Carlo Caballero observes, what Lee refuses in her aesthetic system, 'what would otherwise remain unwritten ... became a rich fund for her imaginative writing'.<sup>115</sup> Winthrop and Magnus then are arguably facets of Lee herself: aspects of her artistic masculinity that project onto the maternal voice 'all that is unassimilable to the paternal position' she adopts. Yet the castrato is also the artist's mirror image, a figure of formidable vocal power that emasculates and disempowers the masculine for, like George Eliot's diva, Armgart, who functions as 'a metaphor for female empowerment in a culture that traditionally places women on the side of silence', the castrato might also declare, 'I carry revenges in my throat'.<sup>116</sup> It is worth noting that in Lee's tales the artist's nemesis is the 'cry', a sound which Lee, in her aesthetic system, associates with the declamatory

<sup>114</sup> It is perhaps worth remembering, as Brian Gregory points out, that 'Medusa is *created* by Athena', that Athena transforms Medusa, once a beautiful maiden, into a gorgon as a punishment for having had sexual relations with Poseidon. See Brian Gregory, 'Sexual Serpents: Ruskin's *The Queen of the Air*', *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, 26.2 (Fall 1999), 73-85, (p. 80). In the light of Ruth Vanita's assertion that marine imagery is prevalent in lesbian poetry, Medusa's sexual engagement with Poseidon takes on an added significance and colours Lee's own Athenian persona as well as the reemergence of Medusan imagery in her supernatural fiction. See Vanita, *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same-Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 66.

<sup>115</sup> Caballero, p. 403.

<sup>116</sup> Rebecca A. Pope, 'The Diva doesn't Die; George Eliot's *Armgart*', in *Embodied Voices*, pp. 139-51, (p. 140); Eliot, *Armgart*, quoted in Pope, p. 146.



voices of Wagnerian opera. The disturbing nature of these voices is illustrated in Lee's essay 'The Religious and Moral Status of Wagner':

Attentive or inattentive, able to follow or not able to follow, your mind is imprisoned in that Wagner performance as in the dark auditorium, and allowed to divagate from the music only to the stage; not the literal stage ... but the inviolable stage of your own emotions, secretly haunted by the vague ghosts of your own past ... by the vaguer fatamorgana figures of your own scarce conscious hopes and desires.<sup>117</sup>

Voices, then, that are heard in the womb-like darkness of the auditorium amid a maelstrom of unruly and disordered sensations. In Lee's fictions these disruptive and disconcerting voices are displaced onto eighteenth-century singers, vessels which feature in her aesthetic system as symbols of Apollonian form and order: a contradiction indicative of those that Caballero locates in her work and a ghostly reminder of the feminine power that haunts not only Lee's fiction but appears as an unacknowledged presence in her theoretical writing.

But why should this figure appear as a ghost? The answer lies perhaps in the homoerotic tensions that underlie these tales. In her book *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*, Terry Castle illustrates the ways in which the lesbian is 'apparitionalized' in the Western imagination, and argues that the 'literary history of lesbianism ... is first of all a history of derealization'.<sup>118</sup> Using texts as disparate as Daniel Defoe's 'The Apparition of Mrs Veal' (1706) and Djuna Barnes'

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<sup>117</sup> Vernon Lee, 'The Religious and Moral Status of Wagner', *Fortnightly Review*, (1911), 868-85, (p. 879).

<sup>118</sup> Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 34.

*Nightwood* (1936), Castle traces the spectral metaphors that have accompanied expressions of lesbian sexuality since the eighteenth century. In Baudelaire's 'Femmes Damnées', 'one of the numerous lesbian obsessed poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857)', Castle notes that Delphine and Hippolyte, 'the tortured lovers, are presented as damned spirits, enslaved by a sterile passion and doomed to wander ceaselessly in a hell of their own creation'.<sup>119</sup> In Swinburne's 'Faustine' (1862), the Roman empress Faustine in whom 'stray breaths of Sapphic song that blew/ Through Mitylene' once 'shook the fierce quivering blood' by night, is 'surrounded in death by the phantoms of the women she has debauched in life' and acquainted with that 'shameless nameless love'.<sup>120</sup> Given Zaffirino's affinity with these ghostly Baudelairian and Swinburnian figures of transgressive sexuality, we can conceivably discover erotic tensions that remain unacknowledged in Lee's private life for, as her friend Irene Cooper Willis remarked, 'Vernon was homosexual, but she never faced up to sexual facts'.<sup>121</sup> Bertrand Russell, somewhat less sympathetic, writes:

She was a woman of almost unbelievable ugliness and probably never aroused desire in any man. She had a whole series of young girls to whom she was a vampire, and when one of them had been used up, she would throw her away and get another. She sapped their life and their energy. She was a very masterful, dominant person - a bloodsucker! And that endless stream of talk. She sucked the blood of all of them.<sup>122</sup>

Here, significantly, Lee's lesbian 'vampirism' is equated with her vocal prowess, her

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<sup>119</sup> Castle, p. 36.

<sup>120</sup> Castle, pp. 37-38.

<sup>121</sup> Gardner, p. 85.

<sup>122</sup> Gardner, p. 60.



voice saps one's energy, drains one's life, immobilizes. Denying her sexuality even to her self, it is unlikely that Lee would consciously have chosen the phantom castrato as a figure of lesbian empowerment. Yet it is worth noting that the hermaphroditic qualities that mark the castrato were often associated with lesbian sexuality during the chronological periods in which Lee sets her fictional singers. At this time the label 'hermaphrodite' encompassed both 'feminine men' and 'masculine women', but the tag was most frequently applied to those who exhibited lesbian desire.<sup>123</sup> Emma Donoghue writes:

In texts circulating in Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, women who had sex with women were often denounced, mocked, and exiled from womanhood; one of the most common strategies was to call them hermaphrodites. There was constant slippage between concepts of sexual deviance at this time, but two ideas in particular - lesbian desire and hermaphroditical anatomy - became tightly bound into the figure of the tribade, a woman whose phallic 'member'... was thought to enable her to have penetrative intercourse with women.<sup>124</sup>

As Donoghue goes on to point out, the medical, or pseudo-medical, literature on the subject expresses a veiled hostility: 'Rather than attacking lesbianism directly as a sin, they explained it away as an anomaly. By cutting lesbians off from their sex, from their own femaleness, these writers ... could reduce them to exceptional, and therefore harmless, freaks of nature'.<sup>125</sup> The phallic 'member' was often a prolapsed vagina or an enlarged clitoris, which was commonly termed 'a miniature version of the penis'.<sup>126</sup> In his

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<sup>123</sup> Emma Donoghue, 'Imagined More than Women: Lesbians as Hermaphrodites, 1671-1766', *Women's History Review*, 2 (1993), 199-216, (p. 201).

<sup>124</sup> Donoghue, p. 199.

<sup>125</sup> Donoghue, p. 201.

<sup>126</sup> Donoghue, p. 204.

treatise, *Onanism* (1766), the Swiss doctor Samuel Tissot argues that these ‘imperfect’ women with a ‘semi-resemblance’ to men ‘glorying, perhaps in this kind of resemblance, seized upon the functions of virility’.<sup>127</sup> Donoghue observes that :

It was one of the ironies of eighteenth-century sexuality that Tissot could present these women’s abnormal imperfection as something to ‘glory’ in, since even a ‘semi-resemblance’ to men was an honour. Though as freaks they were less than whole women, Tissot could not help admitting that in some sense they were more than women too.<sup>128</sup>

The concept of the ‘hermaphroditic’ lesbian resonates interestingly with Sarrasine’s ideal, Zambinella, for she, too, is described by the artist as ‘more than a woman’ (238). The similarity between Balzac’s castrato and Tissot’s lesbian does not perhaps end there. What is perceived to be the lesbian’s ‘miniature penis’ recalls the castrato’s stunted member, and whilst the latter is the result *of* castration, the former was often subjected *to* castration. Quoting from various eighteenth-century texts, Donoghue highlights the fate of the offending anomaly, noting that the consensus of opinion is generally that ‘hermaphrodites both deserved and needed castration’.<sup>129</sup> One might imply then that the figure of the castrato is an inverted incarnation of the lesbian ‘hermaphrodite’. As a fictional representation in Lee’s texts, however, the castrato functions possibly as an ‘inscription of the unintended’ creating ‘the quality of resonance, that rich wake of meaning which rocks our conscious life and disturbs us in our dreams’.<sup>130</sup> He is, I would

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<sup>127</sup> Donoghue, p. 206.

<sup>128</sup> Donoghue, pp. 206-07.

<sup>129</sup> Donoghue, p. 209.

<sup>130</sup> Madelon Sprengnether, ‘Ghost Writing: A Meditation on Literary Criticism as Narrative’, in *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces: Literary Uses of D. W. Winnicott*, ed. by Peter L. Rudnytsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 87-98, (p. 95).



claim, the expression of an alternative subjectivity that is played out in the ‘potential space’ of Lee’s fictions and explored within the ‘safe’ holding environment provided by the ‘maternal’ voice of the castrato, which is simultaneously an ‘acoustic mirror’ of her own.

Arguably this musical ‘maternal’ voice provides the framework for Lee’s play, *Ariadne in Mantua*, which she sees as an allegorical dramatization of the ‘contending forces of history and life’, the struggle between ‘Impulse and Discipline’.<sup>131</sup> The play is inspired not only by her own fascination with the ‘palace of Mantua and the lakes it steeps in’, which she had written of earlier in *Genius Loci* (1899), but also more specifically by a piece of music. In her preface to the play Lee writes:

looking into my mind one day, I found that a certain song of the early seventeenth century - (not Monteverde’s ‘Lamento d’Arianna’ but an air, ‘Amarilli’, by Caccini, printed alongside in Parisotti’s collection) - had entered that palace of Mantua, and was, in some manner not easy to define, the musical shape of what must have happened there. And that, translated back into human personages, was the story I have set forth in the following little Drama.<sup>132</sup>

Lee’s acknowledged indebtedness to Shakespeare associates the play with the male canon, and her adopted ‘masculine’ intellectuality. However the play is fraught with sexual ambiguities which, whilst consistent with its Elizabethan antecedents, destabilize its apparent simplicity. As we have already seen, in Lee’s fiction, reversals can be read as indicative of the insecurities that haunt the ‘male’ subjectivity she displays in her theoretical work. The music she sees as ‘orderly’ in her aesthetic system becomes

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<sup>131</sup> Lee, preface to *Ariadne in Mantua*, pp. vii-x, (p. x).

<sup>132</sup> Lee, preface to *Ariadne in Mantua*, p. viii.

disruptive, the powerful and threatening qualities of the female voice which she ostensibly aestheticizes and reforms return in her fiction, and the desire for the feminine which she negates is expressed unequivocally in the homoerotic tensions that characterize 'Winthrop's Adventure' and 'A Wicked Voice'. So what are we to make of the gender instabilities in *Ariadne in Mantua*? It is perhaps in our interest to remember that the latter is a 'play'. Here, in a drama that is inspired by the singing voice, set in a palace surrounded by the waters of the Mantuan lake, Lee plays with a variety of sexual roles. Neither the Duke, nor Magdalen - Diego, nor Hippolyta 'represent the male and the female exclusively'.<sup>133</sup> The Duke, whose 'strange moodiness is marked by an abhorrence of all womankind' (16), is attracted to his page Diego in whom he sees traces of Magdalen (40). He sees 'glances of her' in Diego's eyes and hears her voice in his, and tells him that not music 'but love, love's delusion, was what worked my cure' (40). It remains unclear whether 'love's delusion' is that he sees Magdalen in Diego, or that in Diego he responds to the same androgynous quality that Magdalen, as a Venetian courtesan, is reputed to possess.<sup>134</sup> A similar ambiguity hampers our interpretation of the scene in which Diego sings with Hippolyta. Is it the man or the woman in Diego to whom Hippolyta responds? Having been raised as a substitute boy by her father, Hippolyta is herself sexually ambivalent, an ambiguity which is heightened by her mythological ancestor, the Amazon who cut off her right breast in order to use the bow more easily in warfare, thus

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<sup>133</sup> Gunn, p. 178.

<sup>134</sup> The question of whether the Duke was aware of Diego's true identity is one which concerned readers of *Ariadne in Mantua* during Lee's lifetime. In a letter to Maurice Baring of December 12th, 1932, Lee writes that the players in a projected production of the play, 'will be asking me, as Ben Webster did in Lady Lytton's rehearsals, whether the Duke did or did not recognize Diego. And I had to answer that it was for him to tell *me*, because I didn't know ... what the author intended is neither here nor there ... also I think I like the vagueness better than the realistic possibility'. See Ethel Smyth, *Maurice Baring*, pp. 334-36, (p. 335). Arguably, her preference for ambiguity allows a fictional space for sexual as well as textual ambiguity.



mutilating her body and creating a physical hybridity. But it is Diego's sexuality that most frequently transgresses the borders of socially demarcated gender. Throughout the play he embodies the hybridity of the Venetian courtesan, the 'asexuality' of the castrato, and a fluid homosexuality that eludes definition. This fluidity is heightened by the play's affinity with Elizabethan drama and our own awareness that, in that setting, the role of Diego would have been played by a boy. However, if we step outside our own imaginations onto the nineteenth-century stage, the figure of Diego takes on an added significance. Here, the role would have been played by a woman, a woman who plays the part of a castrato, a figure which is empowered by its voice. Yet when that voice returns to the female body in *Ariadne*, it is 'silenced', initially by the instruments that displace her voice, and finally drowned both literally and figuratively in the Mantuan waters.

In a letter to Maurice Baring, Lee writes of *Ariadne in Mantua* that the 'whole piece was written in a more inevitable, unconscious way than anything else I have ever done, and I respect its integrity just because it made itself without any act of writing or judgment'.<sup>135</sup> As an expression of her 'unconscious' *Ariadne in Mantua* can perhaps shed light on the contradictions between her theoretical writing and her supernatural fiction. In the latter the castrato emerges as a figure of feminine empowerment who simultaneously bears the phallus and the castration wound: an inversion of the phallic woman that haunts the *fin-de-siècle* imagination. In *Ariadne in Mantua*, the castrato figure is untenable on the nineteenth-century stage: the castrato must be played by a woman and the part of Diego is transformed from that of a womanish man, to a mannish woman. The latter dies, unable to exist in the heterosexual order that is reimposed as the play ends. In a play

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<sup>135</sup> Quoted in Gunn, p. 178.

that is in itself a form of ‘song’, set in the womb-like waters of the palace lake, Lee ‘plays’ and attempts to develop her artistic subjectivity, and to find *her* voice, for as Winnicott observes, ‘In a search for the self the person concerned may have produced something valuable in terms of art, but a successful artist may be universally acclaimed and yet have failed to find the self that he or she is looking for’.<sup>136</sup> If the ‘maternal’ voice of the castrato is the ‘holding environment’ in which this subjectivity is being explored, it is significant that this voice, as it appears in Lee’s fiction, symbolizes both release and entrapment. The castrato figure whose voice embodies the tones of both man and woman and yet cannot be confined by its sexuality is a potent symbol of empowerment for the lesbian writer who must masquerade as male, and negate her sexuality.<sup>137</sup> Yet the demise of the ‘castrato’ in *Ariadne in Mantua* acknowledges the impossibility of this position. The castrato remains a ghostly figure embedded in the rejected ‘enchanted garret’ of Lee’s imagination, returning only in her fiction and hiding its implications in musical fantasy for if ‘you speak a secret you lose it; ... But if you sing the secret, you magically manage to keep it private, for singing is a barricade of codes’.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 54.

<sup>137</sup> In his review of Peter Gunn’s biography of Lee, Mario Praz refers to an incident which resonates interestingly with the idea of the castrato as an inverted lesbian identification. Praz writes, ‘One of Lee’s friends, Mrs Forbes-Mosse, said that when she first met her [Vernon Lee], she had a feeling almost of awe; she felt like the Virgin Mary in front of the angel of the Annunciation. Angels are without sex, and in any case they do not belong to this world. This is why Vernon Lee, in spite of her brilliant conversation, her genial aggressiveness, her vastness of interests, could be admired, but not loved, feel intimacy with the things of nature, culture, and art, but not with men and women who felt that hers was a clever artifact rather than art’. See Mario Praz, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935*, by Peter Gunn, (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), *English Studies*, 47 (1966), 310-14, (p. 314). As a form of ‘sexless angel’, Lee would seem to share an affinity with castrati who, as Michel Poizat observes, initially fulfilled the ‘angelic function’ in the liturgy in the Catholic church (quoted in Frank, p. 98).

<sup>138</sup> Koestenbaum, p. 157.



2

A White and Ice-Cold World

*Where between sleep and life some brief space is,  
 With love like gold bound round about the head,  
 Sex to sweet sex with lips and limbs is wed,  
 Turning the fruitful feud of hers and his,  
 To the waste wedlock of a sterile kiss.*  
 Algernon Charles Swinburne (1866)<sup>1</sup>

In Chapter One I argued that the operatic voice of the castrato in Lee's tales functions both as a form of 'transitional object' and as a 'maternal' voice that is simultaneously absent and present, thus creating a psychic 'holding environment' within which Lee 'plays' with alternative subjectivities. It seems significant that the Dionysian figure of the castrato remains implicitly important in the sculptural images which appear in Lee's tales. As I aim to show, her excursions into the aesthetics of sculpture employ elements which have become familiar to us in the discussion of the role played by the castrato in the exploration of the self. Here, they develop in the complexities of Lee's metaphorical associations, and emerge, once again, in the imaginative intricacies of her supernatural fiction.

The Magdalen/Diego character in *Ariadne in Mantua* finds its echo, in Lee's aesthetics, in the figure of Orpheus. In the essay 'Orpheus in Rome' which appears in *Althea: a Second Book of Dialogues on Aspirations and Duties* (1894)<sup>2</sup>, Lee explores the aesthetic value of music and sculpture via the dialogic exchange between a fictive self, 'Baldwin', and a close circle of friends loosely based on Lee's own, all of whom had appeared some years earlier in her book, *Baldwin: Being Dialogues on Aspirations and*

<sup>1</sup> 'Hermaphroditus', in *Algernon Charles Swinburne*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell, (London: Everyman, 1997), ll. 15-19, pp. 33-35, (p. 34).

<sup>2</sup> Vernon Lee, *Althea: a Second Book of Dialogues on Aspirations and Duties* (London: Osgood, 1894).



*Duties* (1886).<sup>3</sup> In this essay, Baldwin first appears at an opera where he is discussing his current jaded responses to cultural pursuits which had formerly given him pleasure.

We are told that Baldwin, once moved by the music of Gluck ‘doesn’t care any longer for old music, any more than he cares – really and actively – for antique sculpture’.<sup>4</sup> Yet Gluck’s music, and more particularly the eighteenth-century castrato, Signor Gaetano Guadagni who first played the title role in *Orpheus*, remain an insistent memory for as Baldwin says:

It’s curious ... that one of the few remaining shreds of my old musical lore ... one of the few impressions remaining to me from my eighteenth-century days should happen to be that of the original singer of this very opera – the man for whom Gluck composed his *Orpheus*.<sup>5</sup>

The forceful nature of this memory is recalled by Baldwin in language which connects this singer to Lee’s fictional castrati. Baldwin calls Signor Guadagni a ‘ghost’ and ponders ‘by what caprice some particular ghost chooses to manifest himself and haunt’.<sup>6</sup> The current *Orpheus*, however, is a woman: the notes that draw the company’s attention ‘belonged to a low soprano voice’, that of the singer Helen Hastreiter.<sup>7</sup> Our narrator, Althea, observes that, ‘instead of the disturbing fact of a woman dressed up as a man’, these notes conveyed to the hearer, ‘quite simply, naturally and irrefutably, the existence of a world

<sup>3</sup> Vernon Lee, *Baldwin: Being Dialogues on Views and Aspirations* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1886). In his biography of Lee, Peter Gunn observes that Baldwin ‘is clearly to be identified with Vernon Lee herself’ and that the other speakers in *Althea* include members of Lee’s immediate circle of friends, among them Carlo Placci. See Gunn, p. 112.

<sup>4</sup> Lee, ‘Orpheus in Rome’ in *Althea*, pp. 51-104, (p. 56).

<sup>5</sup> Lee, ‘Orpheus in Rome’, p. 51. Baldwin’s ‘eighteenth-century days’ here represent his interest in the music of the last century. Baldwin is a nineteenth-century figure who has, in the past, appreciated eighteenth-century music and classical Greek art.

<sup>6</sup> Lee, ‘Orpheus in Rome’, p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> Lee, ‘Orpheus in Rome’, p. 57.

of poetry and romance, and the presence of a demi-god'.<sup>8</sup> Although this passage suggests that the singer's sexuality is negated by the beauty of her song, it seems significant that at least one of the company, Donna Maria, needs to resolve the question of sexual ambiguity for she prefers to 'think of her as he' and one of the other interlocutors cannot help but return to the figure of the castrato for, when Baldwin asks for the singer's name, Carlo replies 'Did you think ... it might be the ghost of Signor Guadagni?'.<sup>9</sup>

The opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* is one that carries a history of problematic sexuality. Wendy Bashant writes that it is 'one of the queerest operas I know' and goes on to point out that:

Orfeo and Euridice do not bend gender. They transform it. How many times have they been conceived? Jacopo Peri, Giulio Caccini, Claudio Monteverdi ... Willbald Gluck, ... Hector Berlioz ... Igor Stravinsky. When the opera was born in 1600 (not by any means its origin – Angelo Poliziano's *pastorali*, *Orfeo*, had been around since 1472), it was unsure of its sex, *L'Euridice*? *L'Orfeo*? All of its composers seem unsure.<sup>10</sup>

This sexual ambiguity is complicated further by the main protagonist of the myth itself.

As Bashant observes, 'Orpheus appears to be both asexual and supersexual. He is an artistic figure who creates without a spouse – he invents the world through his song'.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, although the myth suggests the desirability of heterosexual love, it ultimately fails to reestablish heterosexual order. Orpheus loses Eurydice and, in some texts,

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<sup>8</sup> Lee, 'Orpheus in Rome', p. 57.

<sup>9</sup> Lee, 'Orpheus in Rome', p. 58.

<sup>10</sup> Wendy Bashant, 'Singing in Greek Drag: Gluck, Berlioz, George Eliot', in *En Travesti: Women, Gender, Subversion, Opera.*, ed. by Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 216-41, (p. 217).

<sup>11</sup> Bashant, p. 218. Bashant directs us to *The Argonautica* for this version of the Orpheus myth.



appears to be homosexual:

Ovid speaks of how ‘his life was given to young boys only’ ... causing the Maenads to tear him into pieces. Others further confuse the tale by describing how his body parts finally find their resting-place on the isle of Lesbos. Orpheus becomes not-man and not-woman, a mythic figure who exaggerates the codes of sexual difference that he himself displays.<sup>12</sup>

Bashant claims that this gender ambiguity is heightened in the performance of Gluck’s version of the opera for, beginning after Eurydice’s death, its opening setting is that of Eurydice’s tomb, a scene in which the relevant dichotomy is not that between male and female but that between the living and the dead.<sup>13</sup>

Berlioz’s transcription of Gluck’s opera for the French stage confuses the gender issue further. As Bashant observes:

Gluck’s title role was originally performed in 1762 by the celebrated castrato contralto, Gaetano Guadagni. When Gluck was called to Paris by Marie Antoinette in 1773, he was forced to transpose the part down a fifth so that a tenor could sing it, since the Paris opera never used castrati. In the nineteenth century the exceptionally talented Pauline Garcia Viardot persuaded Hector Berlioz to restore Orfeo to the contralto line.<sup>14</sup>

Viardot’s vocal excellence and striking stage presence recall Lee’s castrati. She is a singer with a voice of ‘extraordinary range ... she had been able to take notes in the upper soprano register with ease, and to sing in the contralto register too’.<sup>15</sup> She has ‘a strange,

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<sup>12</sup> Bashant, p. 218.

<sup>13</sup> Bashant, p. 219.

<sup>14</sup> Bashant, p. 219.

<sup>15</sup> April Fitzlyon, *The Price of Genius: A Life of Pauline Viardot* (London: Calder, 1964) p. 39.

exotic charm' and the power of her performance leads Berlioz to write, 'The impression of yesterday still remains. It is a pain, an obsession ... I have lost my bearings, like the needle of a compass during a typhoon'; language that reminds us of the turmoil of Lee's composer, Magnus, in 'A Wicked Voice', once he has heard the voice of Zaffirino.<sup>16</sup>

Viardot's association with the castrato does not end there. As Felicia Miller observes, Viardot became known as 'a knowledgeable proponent of "antique Italian song" and performed arias by Handel and other eighteenth-century composers'.<sup>17</sup> Like Gaetano Guadagni, whose gestures, as Baldwin quoting Dr Burney observes, would have been 'excellent studies for a statuary,' Viardot has a 'statuesque grace', and 'an innate dignity and nobility' that is also reminiscent of the 'noble simplicity and ... calm grandeur' that J. J. Winckelmann was to assert as the defining quality of the Greek sculptural ideal.<sup>18</sup> For Winckelmann, this ideal seems intrinsically related to the androgynous body for, as Simon Richter notes, although Winckelmann's conception of 'noble simplicity' and quiet grandeur is initially located in the statue of the Laocoön, when he comes to write his history of antique art, this statue 'no longer holds a central place in his aesthetic thinking. It has been supplanted, however discreetly, by the figure of the eunuch'.<sup>19</sup> As Richter goes on to point out, in Winckelmann's *Gesichte der Kunst des Alterthums (History of the Art of Antiquity)* (1764), 'every time he looks for the visual instance that best embodies the classical ideal, his eye strays past the Laocoön and the Apollo Belvedere, and fixes on

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<sup>16</sup> Fitzlyon, pp. 49, 353.

<sup>17</sup> Felicia Miller, 'Farinelli's Electronic Hermaphrodite and the Contralto Tradition', in *The Work of Opera: Genre, Nationhood, and Sexual Difference*, ed. by Richard Dellamora and Daniel Fischlin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 73-92, (p. 81).

<sup>18</sup> Lee, 'Orpheus in Rome', p. 54; Fitzlyon, pp. 354, 71; Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Simon Richter, *Laocoön's Body and the Aesthetics of Pain: Winckelmann, Lessing Herder, Moritz, Goethe* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), p. 48.



the eighteenth-century Italian castrato'.<sup>20</sup> The sculptural ideal, like the ideal voice, is apparently one that can cross physical and sexual boundaries.

## Musical Statues

Interestingly, these androgynous bodies immortalized in Greek sculpture are themselves described in musical metaphor. In *A Problem in Greek Ethics* (1883), John Addington Symonds writes that the Greeks were 'enthusiastic for that corporeal beauty ... which marks male adolescence no less triumphantly than does the male soprano voice upon the point of breaking' and that,

When distinction of feature and symmetry of form were added to this charm of youthfulness, the Greeks admitted, as true artists are obliged to do, that the male body displays harmonies of proportion and melodies of outline more comprehensive, more indicative of strength expressed in terms of grace, than that of women.<sup>21</sup>

This link between music and the perfection of form had been forged some time earlier by Walter Pater in *The Renaissance* (1873), in which he writes:

Art, [is] ... always striving to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception, to get rid of its responsibilities to its subject or material ... It is the art of music which most completely realises this artistic ideal, this

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<sup>20</sup> Richter, p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> John Addington Symonds, *A Problem in Greek Ethics: Being An Inquiry into the Phenomenon of Sexual Inversion Addressed Especially to Medical Psychologists and Jurists* (London: Privately Printed, 1908), p. 68.

perfect identification of matter and form ... Therefore, although each art has its incommunicable element, its untranslatable order of impressions, its unique mode of reaching the 'imaginative reason,' yet the arts may be represented as continually struggling after the law or principle of music, to a condition which music alone completely realises; and one of the chief functions of aesthetic criticism, dealing with the products of art, new or old, is to estimate the degree in which each of those products approaches, in this sense, to musical law.<sup>22</sup>

As one of Pater's disciples, it is unsurprising to find that Lee, in her own critical writing, discusses the musical properties of sculpture.<sup>23</sup> In *Belcaro*, in an essay entitled 'Orpheus and Eurydice: the Lesson of a Bas-Relief' she observes that when we look at sculpture we appreciate a work of art at once 'plastic and musical'; she writes that what we enjoy, 'is the work of art itself, the combination of lines, lights and shades and colours in the one case, the combination of modulations and harmonies in the other'.<sup>24</sup> This harmonic fusion of the musical and the sculptural is epitomized in Théophile Gautier's famous poem 'Contralto' which was first published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1849 and later appeared in *Emaux et Camées* in 1852. Gautier considers the statue of the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* in the Louvre (fig. 2); 'is it youth or is it maiden sweet?' he asks, and acknowledges the 'fair fascination' of its 'Uncertain sex' that leads him to create a poetic fantasy which equates the statue with the contralto voice:

<sup>22</sup> Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 88-89.

<sup>23</sup> In '“Vernon Lee”: A Commentary and Annotated Bibliography of Writings About Her', *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920*, 26 (1983), 268-312, Carl Markgraf notes that Lee was called 'the only disciple Walter Pater ever acknowledged.' (p. 269). Lee dedicated *Euphorion* (1884) to Pater and concluded *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895) with a six-page tribute to him in which she refers to him as her 'master' (Gardner, n. 1, p. 541).

<sup>24</sup> Lee, 'Orpheus and Eurydice', in *Belcaro*, pp. 49-69, (p. 62).



O dream of poet passing every bound!  
 My thought hath built a fancy of thy form,  
 Till it is molten into silver sound,  
 And boy and girl are one in cadence warm.

O tone divine, O richest tone of earth,  
 The beautiful, bright statue's counterpart!  
 Contralto, thou fantastical of birth,  
 The voice's own Hermaphrodite thou art!<sup>25</sup>

Although thought to have been written for Guilia Grisi, the famous Italian soprano - a contemporary and rival of Pauline Viardot - Felicia Miller observes there is evidence to suggest that the poem refers to Viardot. In his review of the latter's debut performance Gautier writes:

Pauline Viardot's voice was first striking for its expressive intensity ... One was immediately moved, conquered, possessed. And then one noticed the exceptionally extensive resources of her vocal organ. Music critics measure pedantically the extremes ... Three and a half octaves, one says, carried away by enthusiasm ... Let us accept ... Berlioz ['s assessment], according to [which] Pauline's voice had as its limits low F and high C, say, two octaves and a fifth ... her voice was, as Berlioz says, 'equal in all registers, true, vibrant and agile'.<sup>26</sup>

Miller notes that this description of Viardot's voice resonates with that given of Farinelli's voice in Patrick Barbier's book, *Farinelli, Castrat des Lumières*, where we are told that it was 'perfect, efficient, and sonorous in quality and rich in its range from the deepest notes to the highest' thus reinforcing the sexual ambiguity of Viardot's voice.<sup>27</sup> It is perhaps fitting, then, that Miller should suggest that the link forged between the

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<sup>25</sup> Gautier, 'Contralto', p. 71.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Miller, p. 82.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Miller, p. 82.

hermaphrodite statue in the Louvre and the contralto voice refers to Viardot. Moreover, Miller observes that, in the poem, Gautier ‘adduces a list of contralto roles, almost all ... from Rossini operas ... roles [that] match those that Gautier imagined for Viardot in his review of her debut’.<sup>28</sup>

That Viardot’s contralto voice prompted Gautier to reconsider a sculptural artifact, leads us back to Lee and, more specifically, to her alter ego Baldwin in the essay ‘Orpheus in Rome’, for here, once again, it is the voice which leads to a reexamination of sculpture. After hearing the performance of Gluck’s *Orpheus*, Baldwin revisits the Vatican museum and rediscovers his enthusiasm for Greek sculpture, declaring to Donna Maria that:

it is the music which has made me able once more to love the statues – it’s the poetry of those divine melodies, of that exquisite expression and gesture, which has made me feel once more the poetry of that silent, motionless people of marble.<sup>29</sup>

Having spent an unhappy period as a decadent ‘modern’ who longs for ‘some far-fetched allegoric creature, a feeble lived hybrid’ from the works of Burne-Jones – ‘a creature with a wistful face and dubious anatomy’ - Baldwin ostensibly returns to a former, ‘classical self’ who appreciates the music of the eighteenth century and Greek sculpture, both of which paradoxically find their ideal in the sexual uncertainty that characterizes Burne-Jones’ androgynous figures.<sup>30</sup> Given the ambiguities traced in the polemic structures of Lee’s aesthetics and the identification of the self through the figure of the castrato

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<sup>28</sup> Miller, p. 82.

<sup>29</sup> Lee, ‘Orpheus in Rome’, p. 92.

<sup>30</sup> Lee, ‘Orpheus in Rome’, p. 70.



discussed in the previous chapter, this association between the hermaphroditic voice and the antique statue compels exploration. As we have seen, the androgynous figure of the castrato and the musical perfection of the voice remain insistent motifs in Lee's aesthetic works. What I intend to show is that the castrato voice and its androgynous sexuality are also implicit in her consideration of sculpture, and that, like this voice, the sculptural artifact functions as a form of 'transitional object' in her fantasies, enabling her to explore an ambiguity of form that she denies in her aesthetics, but which, nevertheless, manifests itself in the alternative identities that inhabit the sculptural figures of her supernatural fiction. However, such an examination requires that we first look at our psychological responses to sculpture in order to show how these emerge in Lee's aesthetics and, later, in her supernatural tales.

### **Statues and Things: Fantasies of Regression**

Like Lee's castrati, the statue can appear to have both a material and a 'dematerialized presence'.<sup>31</sup> In his essay, 'Dolls and Things: The Reification and Disintegration of Sculpture in Rodin and Rilke', Alex Potts explores the implications of this fantasy and traces the contradictory responses of plenitude and anxiety that manifest themselves when 'a quasi-animistic power' is attributed to the sculptural object.<sup>32</sup> Although Potts's essay refers primarily to Rodin's art, he tells us that these responses are 'just as relevant

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<sup>31</sup> Alex Potts, 'Dolls and Things: The Reification and Disintegration of Sculpture in Rodin and Rilke', in *Sight and Insight: Essays on Art and Culture in Honour of E. H. Gombrich at 85*, ed. by John Onians (London: Phaidon Press, 1994), pp. 335-78, (p. 335).

<sup>32</sup> Potts, 'Dolls and Things', p. 335.

to the experience of modern abstract work as to that of traditional figurative sculpture' and goes on to say that 'In both instances ... the sculptural object becomes the staging ground for projections of some ideal simplified sense of self', a model which recalls the myth of Pygmalion which we will return to later.<sup>33</sup> Potts differentiates between neo-classical aesthetics which, he argues, sees the statue as 'an ideal autonomous ego' analogous to the fantasy image of the Lacanian mirror phase in the subject's early development, and Rilke's aesthetical response to Rodin's work which is not produced by anthropomorphization, but by sculpture's 'thing-like quality'.<sup>34</sup> According to Rilke, in Rodin's works one no longer sees 'men and women ... The more one looks, the more does even this content become simplified, and one sees Things' (fig. 3).<sup>35</sup> Rilke's conception of the sculpture as 'thing' is rendered, according to Potts, by acknowledging the sculptor's construction of the sculpture 'not by an image of the whole body, but by a closely felt involvement with modelling'.<sup>36</sup> Rilke writes:

This work [of modelling] was the same in everything one made, and had to be carried out so humbly, so obediently, so devotedly, so impartially on face and hand and body that no specified parts remained and the artist worked the form without knowing what exactly would result, like a worm working its way from point to point in the dark.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Potts, 'Dolls and Things', p. 335.

<sup>34</sup> Potts, 'Dolls and Things', pp. 361-62.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Potts, 'Dolls and Things', p. 362.

<sup>36</sup> Potts, 'Dolls and Things', p. 362.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Potts, 'Dolls and Things', p. 362.



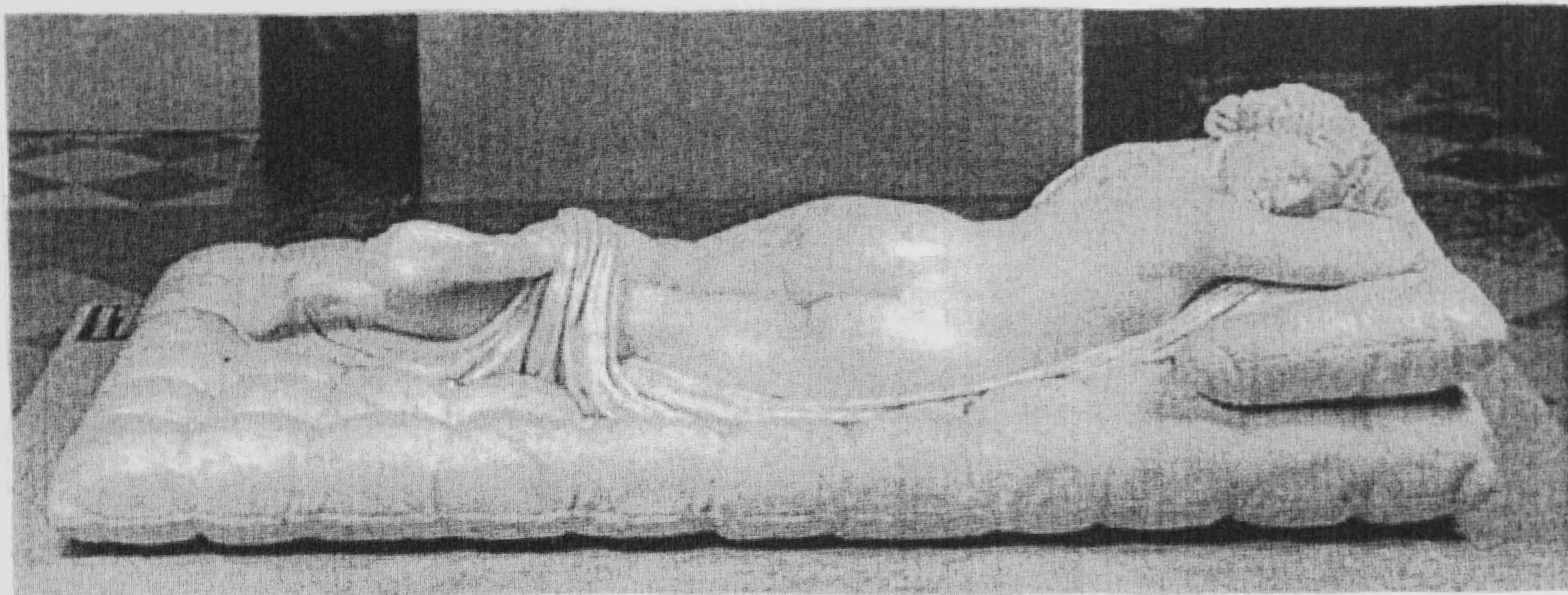


Fig. 2 *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, The Louvre, Paris.



Fig. 3 Auguste Rodin, *Pygmalion and Galatea*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



For Potts, this focus on sculptural modelling serves a double function. Once the spectator's gaze centres on the undulations of the statue's surface, the sculpture may no longer be seen as a human image, but it still retains 'an intangible charge or presence' that is a symptom of its thing-like quality.<sup>38</sup>

The 'dematerialized presence' of the sculptural object is in Rilke's mind inextricably linked to early childhood fantasies. Rilke writes:

If possible, out of practice and grown-up as your feelings are, bring them back to any one of your childhood's possessions with which you were familiar ... That something, worthless as it was, prepared the way for your first contact with the world, introduced you to life and to people: and, more than that, its existence, its outward appearance, whatever it was, its final destruction or mysterious withdrawal from the scene caused you to know the whole of human experience, even to death itself.<sup>39</sup>

Potts argues that in Rilke's essay, Rodin's 'thing' becomes 'analogous to what in psychoanalytic object relations theory would be called a transitional object', that object that 'exists when there is as yet no clear distinction between projections of fantasy and what exists beyond the self' and 'when inanimate things and bodily presences blur together as "objects" in the still amorphous landscapes of the infantile psyche'.<sup>40</sup> Potts observes that the psychodynamic function of the object was to haunt Rilke's writings in which it appeared to summon 'fantasies of unmediated appropriation and nightmares of stark alienation'.<sup>41</sup> In his essay on dolls Rilke traces the negative responses triggered in the child who discovers that, far from being attuned to its subjective needs, the doll is in

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<sup>38</sup> Potts, 'Dolls and Things', p. 362.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Potts, 'Dolls and Things', pp. 367-68.

<sup>40</sup> Potts, 'Dolls and Things', p. 368.

<sup>41</sup> Potts, 'Dolls and Things', p. 372.



fact an inanimate object, unresponsive and inert. The child discovers that the doll is ‘soulless’ and it is ‘unmasked as the horrible foreign body on which we had wasted our purest ardour’.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, Potts argues that, for Rilke, the doll and the statue seem intimately related. He asks:

Accumulated as inert objects in the alien spaces of a museum, did not Rodin’s sculpture threaten to become like the array of dolls that had ‘confronted [Rilke] and almost overwhelmed [him] by their waxen nature’ and inspired his essay on the hated doll-thing? Would they be able to distinguish themselves from the ‘monotonous whiteness of all those great dolls’ so disliked by Baudelaire?<sup>43</sup>

The sculpture, then, like the doll, engages the spectator simultaneously in a regressive fantasy of interaction and a destructive process of alienation. Lee herself comments on this process. In *Belcaro* she considers the effect of the museum’s statuary through the eyes of a child:

What ... must not this Vatican be for a child: a quite small, ignorant barbarian such as has never before set its feet in a gallery, to whom art and antiquity have been mere names, to whom all this world of tintless stone can give but a confused, huge, overpowering impression of dreariness and vacuity. An impression composed of negative things: of silence and absence of colour, of lifelessness, of not knowing what it all is or all means; a sense of void and of unattractive mystery which chills, numbs the little soul into a sort of emotionless, inactive discomfort.<sup>44</sup>

In Chapter One, I discussed how this initial sense of alienation becomes a fantasy of interaction where the statues ‘speak’ to the child and stimulate its imagination and its

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<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Potts, ‘Dolls and Things’, p. 372.

<sup>43</sup> Potts, ‘Dolls and Things’, p. 373.

<sup>44</sup> Lee, ‘The Child in the Vatican’, p. 19.

creativity. As we have seen, this child, as Peter Gunn has suggested, is arguably Lee herself and it seems significant that this dual experience of alienation and interaction remains in Lee's adult response to sculpture. Later in *Belcaro*, Lee discusses the Niobe group and is concerned that we should learn the lesson that 'the only intrinsic perfection of art is the perfection of form'.<sup>45</sup> Yet she acknowledges that the Niobe's 'perfection of line and curve' leads to an emotional paralysis, a response which seems analogous to Rilke's own when confronted by the figure of the doll. Lee writes:

by the side of this overwhelming positive sense of beauty there creeps into our consciousness an irritating little sense of negation. For the more intense becomes our perception of the form, the vaguer becomes our recollection of the subject; ... our senses cease to shrink with horror, our sympathies cease to vibrate with pity, as we look upon this visible embodiment of the terrible tragedy. We are no longer feeling emotion; we are merely perceiving beauty.<sup>46</sup>

Sculptural beauty, then, for Lee, induces a form of 'anaesthesia', a paralysis which recalls that induced by the castrato cry. In his own discussion of the Niobe sculpture in his book, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History*, Alex Potts writes of Winckelmann's differentiation between the style of the Niobe (fig. 4) and that of the Laocoön (fig. 5). In language which reflects Lee's own response to the Niobe group, Potts writes that 'The "frozen" Niobe achieves its austere intensity through an almost death-like obliteration of signs of feeling, which elevates its expression to the realm of an inhuman beauty' typifying what Winckelmann calls the 'high style'.<sup>47</sup> In contrast, the

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<sup>45</sup> Lee, 'The Child in the Vatican', p. 48.

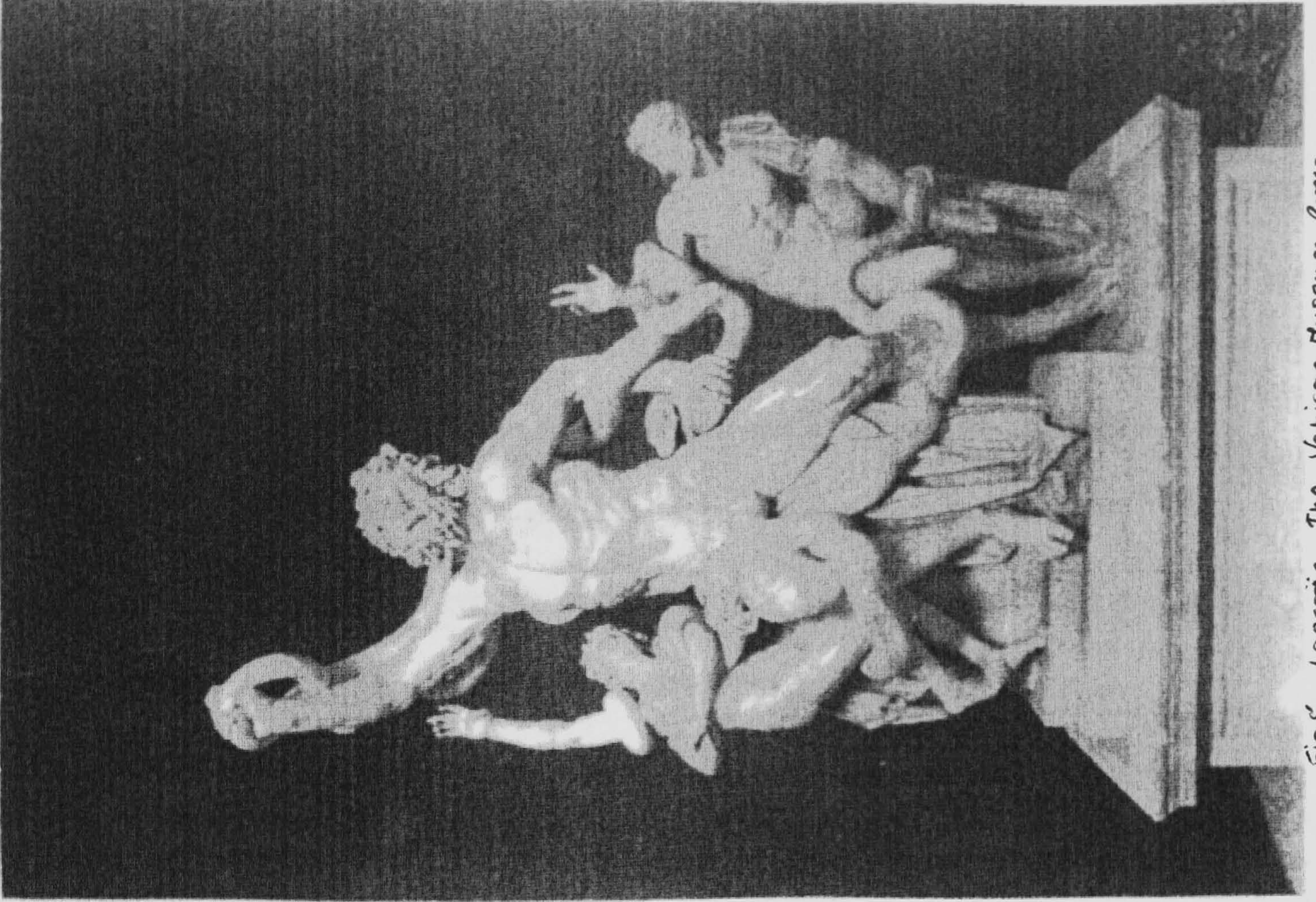
<sup>46</sup> Lee, 'The Child in the Vatican', p. 34.

<sup>47</sup> Alex Potts, *Flesh*, p. 82. The 'frozen' aspect of the Niobe is intrinsically linked to its subject matter. Niobe is frozen in terror when her children are murdered by Diana as punishment for proclaiming her maternal qualities to be greater than those of Diana's mother, Leto.





Fig. 4 Niobe, The Uffizi, Florence.



Figs Laocöon, The Vatican Museum, Rome



Laocoön is ‘shown in the midst of an elaborately modulated struggle, its variegated and beautiful forms, exemplary of the subtle and refined naturalism of the beautiful style’.<sup>48</sup>

For Potts the Niobe ‘stands as an abstract disembodied drama’ in Winckelmann’s ‘high mode’, and the Laocoön ‘as a sensuously embodied drama in the beautiful mode’ of classical statuary.<sup>49</sup> For Winckelmann the distinction between these two styles is analogous to that which applies to the differences between Demosthenes’ and Cicero’s oratory. The former’s rhetoric is likened to a thunderbolt, it ‘suspends time’ and overwhelms its audience; the latter’s develops slowly and ‘gradually but powerfully ... [takes] it over’.<sup>50</sup> Potts observes that the Niobe and the Laocoön ‘function as visual figurations of these rhetorical modes in a distinctly negative and violent register’.<sup>51</sup> In the Niobe, the ‘catastrophic intensity of divine power has obliterated all signs of emotion on her face’.<sup>52</sup> In the Laocoön, the Trojan priest ‘is shown still actively resisting, even if inexorably falling victim to the attack of two snakes sent by the gods to kill him’.<sup>53</sup>

Potts suggests that Winckelmann’s representation of the two styles of ancient art as two differing rhetorical modes equates them with figures of speech:

One is the ‘high’ visual figuration of a sublime figure of speech, the other the ‘beautiful’ visual figuration of a graceful and a beautiful one. The power of one

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<sup>48</sup> Potts, *Flesh*, p. 83.

<sup>49</sup> Potts, *Flesh*, p. 83. Potts’s concern is to discuss the differentiation which Winckelmann posits in his *History* between the Niobe’s ‘high mode’ and the ‘beautiful mode’ of the Laocoön. For a full explanation of these terms, see Chapter 3 of Potts’s book. The ‘disembodiment’ of the Niobe recalls the apparent disembodiment of the castrato voice, which seemingly functions as part of its emotive power, suggesting the ‘disembodied’ maternal voice which the child hears when the mother is both present and ‘absent’ simultaneously during the transitional phase of psychic separation.

<sup>50</sup> Potts, *Flesh*, p. 103.

<sup>51</sup> Potts, *Flesh*, p. 103.

<sup>52</sup> Potts, *Flesh*, p. 103.

<sup>53</sup> Potts, *Flesh*, p. 108. Variations of the Laocoön myth suggest that he merited his punishment either because of his sacrilegious fornication with his wife in front of a sacred image of Apollo, or because he is reputed to have thrown a spear at the Trojan horse, thus threatening the Greeks’ invasion of Troy.



mode is shown as suddenly overwhelming its audience, suspending or obliterating any capacity to resist, and the other as steadily overcoming it and inexorably carrying it off. To transpose the contrast into the language of semiotics, one figure [Niobe] is the living sign obliterated and stilled by the unmediated presence of an immaterial idea; the other [Laocoön] is the still living sign, refracting or mediating the presence of an immaterial idea in a beautifully and powerfully modulated play of form.<sup>54</sup>

I will return to the subject of the Laocoön in a moment, but before I do so, I wish to reconsider Lee's discussion of the Niobe in the light of Winckelmann's association of sculpture and rhetoric. Lee's depiction of the Niobe group centres on the importance of form and she uses the language of music, or more particularly the choral voice, to describe that perfection:

For, as the various voices of the fugue, some subtly insinuating themselves half whispered, while the others are thundering their loudest or already dying away into silence, meet and weave together various fragments of the same melody, so also do the figures of the group, some standing, some reclining, some kneeling, some rising, some draped, some nude, meet our sight in various ways so as to constitute in their variety, one great pattern; ... the triumphant centre of the rhythm and harmony of lines, is formed by the majestic, magnificent mother between her two eldest, most beautiful daughters.<sup>55</sup>

This perfection, 'as of the single small voice, swelling and diminishing in crisp exquisiteness every little turn and shake', centres on the figure of Niobe whose silent cry of maternal anguish is reminiscent of the operatic cry; a fixed moment of sublimity that wrests the spectator's attention from the 'text' of the Niobe sculpture, just as the operatic cry wrests one's attention from the libretto's written word.<sup>56</sup> In contrast, as we

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<sup>54</sup> Potts, *Flesh*, p. 108.

<sup>55</sup> Lee, 'The Child in the Vatican', pp. 32-33.

<sup>56</sup> Lee, 'The Child in the Vatican', p. 34.

have seen, the Laocoön apparently produces a gradual effect on the senses which is always controlled by the form. Yet the ‘cry’ which induces paralysis is also to be found in the figure of the Laocoön. In her essay ‘Language’s Wound: Herder, Philoctetes, and the Origin of Speech’, Liliane Weissberg discusses the role played by the ‘cry’ in Herder’s treatise, ‘Abhandlung uber den Ursprung der Sprache’ (‘Essay on the Origin of Language’) (1772). Whilst Herder’s interest in its role in the differentiation of language between animal and human is not our concern here, it seems significant that, for Herder, the cry is ‘pain’s music’.<sup>57</sup> The Laocoön, like the Niobe, represents pain: the Trojan priest is depicted in his struggle against the venomous bites of the snakes sent by the gods to kill him. Interestingly, however, Winckelmann’s influential description of the statue’s *stille grosse* or ‘calm grandeur’ implies a stillness which, as Potts observes, recalls a death-like paralysis:

The word *stille* ... [suggests] an absence of signs of life. ‘Calm grandeur’ projects an image of resonant heroism, the great soul effortlessly in possession of his strength. ‘Still grandeur’ could be something else – the stillness of an imperturbable calm that might be inanimate or inhuman, perhaps the stillness of death.<sup>58</sup>

The ‘cry’ whether musical or sculptural induces a paralysis that simultaneously heightens and inhibits the viewer’s conception of the sculptural form. Lee’s concern with symbolic form is apparently undermined by the semiotic rhythms of the sculpture.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Liliane Weissberg, ‘Language’s Wound: Herder, Philoctetes, and the Origins of Speech’, *Modern Language Notes*, 104 (1989), pp. 548-79, (p. 550).

<sup>58</sup> Potts, *Flesh*, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> The word ‘semiotic’ is used here in the Kristevan sense outlined in the previous chapter.



Yet this semiotic strand is not restricted to musical metaphor, it pervades Lee's engagement with the Niobe statue itself. She asks us to consider:

the powerfully rhythmical attitudes, the beautiful combinations of lines and light and shade produced by the gesture, which now raises, now drops the drapery, opposing to the large folds, heavy and severe, the minute, most supple, and most subtle plaits; and to the strong broken shadows of the drapery, the shining smoothness of the nude.<sup>60</sup>

This concern with the mouldings and undulations of sculpture is not limited to Lee's writings on the Niobe. In an essay on sculpture in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895), Lee observes that the Greek statue, even if eventually produced in marble, was conceived by sculptors who modelled in clay. She writes:

The Greek, therefore, was a moulder of clay, a caster of bronze ... Now clay (and we must remember that bronze is originally clay) means the modelled plane and succession of planes smoothed and rounded by the finger, the imitation of all nature's gently graduated swellings and depressions, the absolute form as it exists to the touch.<sup>61</sup>

Here, as in 'The Child in the Vatican', Lee's responses to the sculptural form are reminiscent of those of Winckelmann whose image of the ideal 'becomes identified with an abstract flow of contour and surface'.<sup>62</sup> Winckelmann writes:

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<sup>60</sup> Lee, 'The Child in the Vatican', p. 33.

<sup>61</sup> Vernon Lee, 'Tuscan Sculpture' in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (London: Smith & Elder, 1895), pp. 135-61, (p. 144).

<sup>62</sup> Potts, *Flesh*, p. 170.

The more unity there is in the connection between forms, and in the flowing of the one into the other, the greater is the beauty of the whole ... A beautiful youthful figure is fashioned from forms like the uniform expanse of the sea, which from a distance appears flat and still, like a mirror, though it is also constantly in motion and rolls in waves.<sup>63</sup>

In Winckelmann's experience, as in Lee's, 'the differentiated and variegated forms of the body have melted away in a continuously flowing curve'.<sup>64</sup> As Alex Potts observes:

The demand for absolute clarity and definition associated with the highest beauty is realized in a radically contradictory image, an abstract contour that is at one level the figure of geometric precision, but at another a floating, undulating line, dissolving any sense of shape in a free play of form.<sup>65</sup>

Potts goes on to point out that, in psychoanalytic terms, this experience can be termed a regression fantasy. It is an 'archaic, polymorphous, and objectless experience that seems to exist prior to any separation between the self and the world around it, in which there is no sense of things as bounded separate entities'.<sup>66</sup> Although Potts suggests that in Winckelmann, this state may be described as auto-erotic, it also recalls Rilke's response to Rodin's sculpture in which the statue becomes a transitional object, which exists 'when there is as yet no clear distinction between projections of fantasy and what exists beyond the self'.<sup>67</sup>

In Lee, in particular, the choice of the Niobe, a maternal figure, heightens the fantasy of 'oneness' with the mother that is a feature of the child's perception in the

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<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Potts, *Flesh*, p. 170.

<sup>64</sup> Potts, *Flesh*, p. 170.

<sup>65</sup> Potts, *Flesh*, p. 170.

<sup>66</sup> Potts, *Flesh*, p. 170.

<sup>67</sup> Potts, 'Dolls and Things', p. 368.



transitional object phase. It seems significant that, as in the child's engagement with the maternal voice, this experience can be one of plenitude or one of entrapment which borders precariously on the threshold of alienation. The Niobe sculpture dramatizes this process. There is a fantasy of 'oneness' in its conception; the mother and her children are moulded together. At the same time, however, it represents a moment of suspended separation; the children from their mother through death, and Niobe's consciousness from her body through paralysis. Yet it is not the tangible drama that concerns us here. Arguably, there is an implicit drama which is played out, as we shall see, in the semiotic rhythms of the Niobe sculpture.

### **Madonnas Antique and Modern: Identifications and Desires**

Writing of the essay, 'Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini' in which Kristeva argues that Bellini's Madonna paintings play out the transference of the child's separation from the mother, Mary Bittner Wiseman claims that the maternal body:

comes to be seen through its painted representations and, finally, through the lines and colors that paintings are, no matter their subject ... Insofar as the painting exemplifies 'the intersection of sign and rhythm, of representation and light, of the symbolic and the semiotic,' it is a record made by the unconscious of 'those clashes that occur between the biological and social program of the species'.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Mary Bittner Wiseman, 'Renaissance Paintings and Psychoanalysis: Julia Kristeva and the Function of the Mother', in *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing*, ed. by Kelly Oliver (New York: Routledge, 1993) pp. 92-115, (pp. 97-98).

Informed by Kristeva's analysis of Bellini's Madonna paintings, Wiseman suggests that, here, the separation of the child from the mother is depicted in terms of the mother's psychic absence:

Bellini portrays the absence of the mother by the split in the maternal body, between hands that hold the child as close as ever womb held its guest and dreaming, inward-looking face. Her body is there, *she* is not.<sup>69</sup>

This resonates interestingly with Lee's Niobe whose hands clutch her children in a desperate gesture, whilst her body is 'frozen' and her mind paralyzed and therefore 'absent'. Wiseman's essay is prompted by a reconsideration of Freud's 'Dora' (1905), whose eponymous subject remains '*two hours* in front of the Sistine Madonna, rapt in silent admiration'.<sup>70</sup> She observes that Freud's interpretation of Dora's fascination with the Madonna is explained as her identification with her, because 'the notion of the "Madonna" is a favorite counter-idea in the mind of girls who feel themselves oppressed by imputations of sexual guilt'.<sup>71</sup> Yet, as Wiseman points out, there are other ways in which Dora might have responded to the Sistine Madonna:

She could have wanted to have the Madonna rather than to be her, loving a woman as Freud later discovered she did. She could have wanted to be the child in the Madonna's arms, loving her mother and wanting to be loved by her as she once was.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Wiseman, p. 98.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Wiseman, p. 92.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Wiseman, p. 93.

<sup>72</sup> Wiseman, p. 93.



Wiseman attributes Freud's reluctance to acknowledge either of these possibilities to the problem that, through the process of psychoanalytic transference, in which 'some earlier person is replaced by the person of the physician', Dora's transference, in this instance, would make a woman of him.<sup>73</sup> In a later work, however, 'The Psychogenesis of a case of Homosexuality in a Woman' (1920), Freud was to acknowledge the role of the mother as 'love-object' in female homosexuality. Discussing the case of a young girl who displays lesbian tendencies after the birth of a younger child in the family. Freud writes,

The analysis revealed beyond all shadow of doubt that the lady-love was a substitute for - her mother. It is true that the lady herself was not a mother, but then she was not the girl's first love. The first objects of her affection after the birth of her youngest brother were really mothers, women between thirty and thirty-five whom she had met with their children during summer holidays or in the family circle of acquaintances in town.<sup>74</sup>

Yet why, we might ask, should Dora's homosexuality or her regressive fantasy be expressed via her response to a work of art? Wiseman's argument stems from Kristeva's theory of interpretation which suggests that the idea of transference is implicit in the multiplicity of ways in which a painter or spectator responds to a painting. Here it is asserted that:

in the encounter with art, any earlier object or drive or desire aroused and made conscious during the encounter may be replaced by any element of the artwork. Moreover, by a natural extension of the theory, the artist or spectator may replace

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<sup>73</sup> Wiseman, p. 96.

<sup>74</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Case of Homosexuality in a Woman', in *The Penguin Freud Library* 24 vols, trans. by James Strachey, ed. by Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1979), IX, pp. 367-400, (p. 382).

herself by some other.<sup>75</sup>

What, then, of Lee's engagement with the Niobe? One might claim that Lee's choice of sculpture is in itself significant. Rejecting the sculptural perfection of the male body so favoured by the aesthetics of Winckelmann, and, later, of Symonds, Lee chooses instead the maternal body of the Niobe on which to focus her gaze. Given Lee's unacknowledged homosexuality one might infer that, like Dora, this may be due to an erotic engagement with the body of the mother. At the same time, there is another dimension to Lee's response to the Niobe. There is a powerful pull towards regression prompted by what Wiseman calls the 'latent' content of the work of art. Here this is,

the memory of a time and a place: the time before the mother became an object and the place (in the womb or at the breast) where what would eventually construct an identity (build up an ego) was neither something nor nothing.<sup>76</sup>

In this context, one might argue that the sculpture functions as a form of womb in which 'each act, each limb, each bone/ Are given life and, lo, man's body is raised, /Breathing, alive, in wax or clay or stone'.<sup>77</sup> It mirrors that place within which the individual develops its consciousness. The child's separation from the womb through birth is the first physical separation, which is reenacted on a psychic level during the transitional object phase and continues to haunt our sense of self in our psychodynamic responses to the art object.

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<sup>75</sup> Wiseman, p. 96.

<sup>76</sup> Wiseman, p. 99.

<sup>77</sup> Michelangelo Buonarroti, Sonnet 85, *The Complete Poems of Michelangelo*, trans. by Joseph Tusiani (London: Peter Owen, 1961), p. 77.



Yet, as we have seen, it is not only through this particular regressive fantasy that the self is negotiated. The sculpture also functions, as Alex Potts observes, as an ‘ideal autonomous ego’ recalling the Lacanian mirror stage which augurs our entry into language and the symbolic.<sup>78</sup> In her book, *Conscience as Consciousness: The Idea of Self-Awareness in French Philosophical Writing from Descartes to Diderot*, Catherine Glyn Davies discusses the Enlightenment use of the animated statue as a model for the self:

Eighteenth-century theorists were increasingly aware of the self as a three-dimensional physical being, occupying external space, and it was natural that one of their most popular and striking analogues of the self was the animated statue.<sup>79</sup>

Inevitably, the model of the animated statue leads us inexorably to the Ovidian myth of Pygmalion. Davies notes the use of this myth by eighteenth-century writers like A. F. Boureau Deslandes and Jean Jacques Rousseau. For Deslandes, the statue’s animation is only the beginning. In his fable, *Pygmalion ou la statue animée* (*Pygmalion or the Animated Statue*) published anonymously in 1741, he hopes for the entity’s progression in understanding and sophistication; Pygmalion ‘expects to see his statue changing and becoming more perfect, progressing towards a condition where she will be able to think’.<sup>80</sup> Prior to attaining self-consciousness, Pygmalion’s newly animated statue is, here, equated with the child, for, before the moment when she becomes conscious of herself in thought she is like a child: ‘c’est ainsi qu’un enfant au berceau ressemble à quelque chose de brut,

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<sup>78</sup> Potts, ‘Dolls and Things’, pp. 361-62.

<sup>79</sup> Catherine Glyn Davies, *Conscience as Consciousness: The Idea of Self-Awareness in French Philosophical Writing from Descartes to Diderot* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1990), p. 139.

<sup>80</sup> Davies, p. 143.

et de plus brut encore, de plus informe que du marbre'.<sup>81</sup> Yet in Rousseau's drama, *Pygmalion*, written in 1763 and performed in 1770, Galatea functions as an epipsychic projection of Pygmalion himself. As Davies observes,

Although he asserts his willingness to live henceforward only through her, what he admires and worships in her is really his own self. The living Galatea is in fact an exteriorisation of Pygmalion, a manifestation of that 'projection de soi' that Jean Starobinski has noticed as an aspect of Rousseau's own narcissism.<sup>82</sup>

If we return to Lee's *Althea*, these animated projections of the self forge an interesting connection with Lee's chosen protagonist. As noted earlier, this collection of essays is linked to a previous collection entitled *Baldwin*. In her introduction to *Althea* Lee writes:

A volume of dialogues similar to these, which I collected some eight years ago, was prefaced by an elaborate account of a personage called Baldwin ... about whose real existence and identity I once seemed so certain, [who] has ceased to exist ... Baldwin has died because, like certain insects, he was organized to live only a few days. He belonged, like many of our dead selves, of the youthful predecessors of our identity, to a genus of ephemera which require an universe without rain, wind, or frost, in fact, made on purpose for them; for the lack of which they suffer horribly, and after brief draggling and fluttering, speedily de cease; die to resuscitate most often, alas (the reverse in this of butterflies), as some humbler kind of creature, less devoted to sunshine, more agreeable to mud.<sup>83</sup>

The passage seems worth quoting in full for it uses the insect metaphor to explore the process of death and rebirth in our own development. It recalls not only the first womb, that sheltered environment in which our physical selves are held, but also holding

<sup>81</sup> Davies, p. 144. 'It is in this way that the child in its cradle resembles something as yet undeveloped, a primitive being, less complete than the unfinished statue' (my own translation).

<sup>82</sup> Davies, p. 141.

<sup>83</sup> Lee, introduction to *Althea*, pp. ix-xviii, (pp. ix-xi).



environments outside the womb from which we emerge as other selves. The ‘new’

Baldwin is Althea, who is

the pupil of Baldwin; for being all she is by the mere grace of God, she is, at first inarticulate, unreasoning, ignorant of all why and wherefore, and requires to be taught many things which others know. But, once having learned the names, so to speak, of her instincts, the premises of her unconscious arguments, she becomes as necessarily the precursor of many of Baldwin’s best thoughts, the perfecter of most of them.<sup>84</sup>

In view of the Enlightenment models of the self discussed earlier, the stress which Lee places on the process of Althea’s development and perfectibility recalls Deslandes’ Pygmalion and one might argue that his ‘Galatea’ is both phonetically and metaphorically implicit in her mythical descendent, Baldwin’s ‘pupil’ and Lee’s creation, ‘Althea’. That Althea also functions, like Rousseau’s Galatea, as both a projection of the self and a love object is made clear in Peter Gunn’s biography of Lee for he writes, ‘Althea herself is based partly on Kit Anstruther-Thomson; “she is naturally the pupil of Baldwin” ... And in real life Kit Anstruther-Thomson did stand in this relation to Vernon Lee’.<sup>85</sup>

Anstruther-Thomson was Lee’s close friend and companion, and an object of her erotic desire. Yet as Lee’s introduction to *Althea* acknowledges, this fictional creation is a

development of Baldwin, and it is perhaps important to note that ‘Vernon Lee always

<sup>84</sup> Lee, *Althea*, pp. xvii-xviii. This passage presents an apparent paradox. If Althea is Baldwin’s ‘pupil’, how can she be the ‘precursor’ as well as the ‘perfecter’ of many of his thoughts? A possible answer lies in Baldwin’s and Althea’s roles as projections of Lee as discussed below. In the context of these merged identities, Althea can indeed be the ‘precursor’ as well as the ‘perfecter’ of many of Baldwin’s thoughts, for they are fundamentally one and the same ‘person’.

<sup>85</sup> Gunn, p. 112. Interestingly, Kit herself had been described to Lee as resembling a statue, the *Venus de Milo*, and on meeting her Lee evidently agreed with the description. In her introduction to Anstruther’s *Art and Man*, she writes, ‘While as to the Venus of Milo, there was no doubt about the likeness, although she wore the inappropriate coat and skirt and sailor hat of the ‘eighties’. See, Vernon Lee, introduction to Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, *Art and Man: Essays and Fragments* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1924), pp. 3-112, (p. 7).

projected into others the virtues she wished to find there'.<sup>86</sup> It is therefore clear that, although inspired by Kit, Althea remains very much a projection of Lee herself. Although ostensibly feminine, Althea, one might argue, is a hybrid creature of indeterminate and fluid sexuality.

In the readings that follow I will claim that, despite Lee's concern with sculptural form, her own ideals, as they emerge in her aesthetics, are undermined by the processes of metamorphosis that are inherent in the models she chooses to represent or voice her aesthetics. Orpheus and Niobe and, by implication, Galatea, are all mythological figures in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; like Althea, they are subjects in the process of change. They demonstrate, in varying ways, a concern with the complexities of the self, through regression, identification, and projection. In doing so they arguably function as 'transitional objects', objects that are separate from, and, at the same time perceived as part of, the self. It is these complexities that I now wish to explore in three of Lee's tales, 'Marsyas in Flanders' (1927), 'St Eudaemon and His Orange Tree' (1904), and 'The Featureless Wisdom' (1904).

### **'Marsyas in Flanders'**

Lee's tale, 'Marsyas in Flanders', which appears in the collection, *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (1927), was inspired, like 'A Wicked Voice', by a childhood recollection. Addressing Maurice Baring (to whom the collection of tales is dedicated), Lee writes:<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Gunn, p. 165.

<sup>87</sup> Vernon Lee, 'Marsyas in Flanders', in *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1927), pp. 71-92. Subsequent references will be given in the text.



The Story called Marsyas though evidently embodying the legend of the Holy Face of Lucca ... has its true origin in a book wherein you and I, dear Maurice, at a due distance of years, learned the graces and horrors of the French language: Cours de Dictées par MM. Noel et Chapsal ... There, in the Cours de Dictées ... was 'Tadolini'. This was the ghostly adventure (by no ascertainable author) of an unidentifiable sculptor of the Middle Ages. It was the story of my marble crucifix cast up on the Northern Coast of France and behaving with miraculous unruliness every time you, that is the sculptor Tadolini, tried to fit it with a missing pair of arms, until ... well! I forget what.<sup>88</sup>

The specifics of the 'Tadolini' tale may have eluded Lee, but from these inauspicious beginnings, 'Out of the long-vanished Cours de Dictées', Lee was to produce her unusual and fascinating story.<sup>89</sup>

The tale itself, like its predecessor, concerns the adventures of a marble crucifix which is cast ashore at Dunes in Northern France in 1195, and which has held pride of place in the little church of Dunes ever since. Arriving at the church of Dunes during the vigil of the Feast of the Crucifix, the narrator notices that the crucifix on display is not, 'like its miraculous companion of Lucca', a Byzantine image as he expected from a sculpture which is reputed to be the work of St Luke, and which 'had hung for centuries in the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem' (72). The Antiquary to whom he expresses his reservations, tells him that he is right, and that a substitution was made some time ago. He then relates the bizarre events which led to this exchange. He tells how the original statue was washed ashore without its cross, and (like Tadolini's sculpture) without its arms, for these were made from separate blocks. Skilled stonemasons were employed to make a new cross and the Effigy was finally erected in the little church of Dunes. The

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<sup>88</sup> Lee, introduction to *For Maurice*, pp. xiii-xv.

<sup>89</sup> Lee, introduction to *For Maurice*, p. xv.

day after, it was discovered that the Effigy, 'had shifted its position, and was bent violently to the right, as if in an effort to break loose' (77). The Effigy did not, however, remain in this new position. It was 'found at intervals of time, shifted in some other manner upon its cross, and always as if it had gone through violent contortions' until, one day some ten years after its arrival, 'the burghers of Dunes discovered the Effigy hanging in its original outstretched, symmetrical attitude, but ... with the cross, broken in three pieces, lying on the steps of its chapel' (78). The Prior of the church, attributing this to 'some trace of unholiness in the stone to which [the Effigy] ... had been fastened' orders another cross which is erected and consecrated some years later (78). At the same time the Prior has a warder's chamber built in the church where this precious relic, whose popularity had resulted in the increasing wealth and development of the village of Dunes, could be guarded day and night. Once the new cross was in place it was hoped that 'no unusual occurrences would increase or perhaps fatally compromise its reputation for sanctity' (80). These hopes were in vain for in November, 1293:

after a year of strange rumours concerning the Effigy, the figure was again discovered to have moved, and continued moving, or rather (judging from the position on the cross) writhing; and on Christmas Eve of the same year, the cross was a second time thrown down and dashed in pieces (80).

The warder on duty is found, almost dead, and disappears mysteriously. For a third time a new cross is made and consecrated. The Prior now in office is at pains to play down the rumours that continue to surround the crucifix but, despite his best efforts, another public event highlights the bizarre nature of this relic:



For, on the Vigil of All Saints, 1299, the church was struck by lightning. The new warder was found dead in the middle of the nave, the cross broken in two; and ... the Effigy was missing. The indescribable fear which overcame every one was merely increased by the discovery of the Effigy lying behind the high altar, in an attitude of frightful convulsion, and, it was whispered, blackened by lightning (82).

The church is shut for nearly a year and, when it reopens, a new chapel has been built and the crucifix is once more displayed, 'dressed in more splendid brocade and gems than usual, and its head nearly hidden by one of the most gorgeous crowns ever seen before' (82). The people of Dunes are told that a further miracle has occurred:

the original cross, on which the figure had hung in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and for which the Effigy had spurned all others made by less holy hands, had been cast on the shore of Dunes, on the very spot where, a hundred years before, the figure of the Saviour had been discovered in the sands (82-83).

The Prior assured the people that, now that it had been reunited with its original cross, the Holy Effigy 'would rest in peace and its miraculous powers would be engaged only in granting the prayers of the faithful' (83). The Antiquary tells the narrator that part of this prophecy came true, the Effigy remained still and the cross intact, but the reason for this lies in the archives of the Archepiscopal palace of Arras, where a stone mason's receipt is found for a life-size figure sculpted in the year 1299, the year when all supernatural events surrounding the crucifix ceased to occur. The original figure, lies buried deep beneath a vaulted passage, an 'iron stake [run] through his middle like a vampire, to prevent his rising' (91). The narrator describes the disturbing sight:

The Effigy was erect against the dark wall, surrounded by brushwood. It was more than life-size, nude, the arms broken off at the shoulders, the head, with stubbly beard and clotted hair, drawn up with an effort, the face contracted with agony; the muscles dragged as of one hanging crucified, the feet bound together with a rope. The figure was familiar to me in various galleries. I came forward to examine the ear: it was leaf-shaped ... 'this supposed statue of Christ is an antique satyr, a Marsyas awaiting his punishment' (92).

Lee's choice of Marsyas as the satyr responsible for these supernatural events seems particularly interesting if we consider the story of Marsyas in Greek myth. Athena, having made a double-flute from stag's bones, plays it at a banquet of the gods where the music is duly appreciated by all but Hera and Aphrodite who seem to be laughing at her. Later, seeing her reflection whilst playing the flute, she understands why: the effort required to play the flute gives her a bluish face and puffed cheeks. In a fit of pique, she throws down the flute and lays a curse on anyone who might find it. Marsyas, a follower of the goddess Cybele, becomes the victim of this curse. He comes across the flute and finds that its music delights all who hear it, and admirers claim that his prowess rivals that of Apollo himself. Marsyas, who does not contradict them, soon finds himself invited to take part in a contest with Apollo, where the winner may impose any punishment he pleases on the loser. Marsyas agrees, and they are evenly matched until Apollo asks that Marsyas play his flute in any way that he can play his lyre. Apollo asks that Marsyas should turn his flute upside down, and play and sing at the same time. Unable to do this, Marsyas loses the contest and Apollo inflicts his punishment. Marsyas is flayed alive and his skin is nailed to a tree.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (London: Penguin, 1992) p. 77.



If we consider that, in the previous chapter, the flute is figured as a transmutation of the gorgonian cry, which is then further aestheticized by the ‘flute-like’ voice of the castrato, it seems significant that Marsyas, who is equally adept at producing exquisite sounds, should be a follower of the goddess Cybele, for her ‘male devotees tried to achieve ecstatic unity with her by emasculating themselves [performing self-castration] and dressing like women’.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, the Dionysian ambiguity that is, as we have seen, inherent both in the flute and in the castrato, can also be traced in the satiric figure of Marsyas. The writhings and contortions that disfigure the Effigy of Dunes occur on stormy nights on which ‘howls, groans, and the music of rustic dancing’ can be heard (81). Witnesses affirm that there was also often ‘a noise of flutes and pipes ... so sweet that the King of France could not have sweeter at his court’ (86), and on one of these occasions a ‘Great Wild Man’ is seen to break the Cross in two, before playing the pipes on the high altar (89).

The Dionysian nature of these events is evident, but Marsyas and Dionysus are more explicitly linked by the flute in Walter Pater’s, *Greek Studies* (1895):

There is one element in the conception of Dionysus, which his connexion with the satyrs, Marsyas being one of them, and with Pan, from whom the flute passed to all the shepherds of Theocritus, alike illustrates, his interest, namely, in one of the great species of music. One form of that wilder vegetation, of which the Satyr race is the soul made visible, is the reed, which the creature plucks and trims into musical pipes.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Graves, p. 117.

<sup>92</sup> Walter Pater, ‘A Study of Dionysus: The Spiritual Form of Fire and Dew’, in *Greek Studies: A Series of Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1928) pp. 1-41, (p. 9).

Marsyas, then, like the castrato, is the embodiment, the ‘soul made visible’ of the reed, and, by implication, of the flute. This association between Marsyas and Dionysus can also be traced in Pater’s, *Denys L’Auxerrois* (1887), a story which, like Lee’s, explores the effect of a pagan influence on a Christian community. The narrator in Pater’s tale first encounters the figure of Denys in a fragment of stained glass and in a series of tapestries both of which display the same theme in which musical instruments, ‘pipes, cymbals’ and ‘long reed-like trumpets’ prevail.<sup>93</sup> Among the stories traced in the tapestries is one that shows the building of an organ. Those listeners shaped in the threads of the tapestries, ‘appear as if transported, some of them shouting rapturously to the organ music’ and a ‘sort of mad vehemence prevails ... throughout the delicate bewilderments of the whole series’ (53). These show ‘giddy dances, wild animals leaping’ and ‘one oft-repeated figure ... that of the organ-builder himself’ (54).

Intrigued by this figure, Pater’s narrator traces the history of Denys L’Auxerrois whom the archives show played his part in the works that adorn the cathedral of St Etienne. A carnivalesque figure, whose presence inspires desire in the women and girls of Auxerre and an unnatural, almost Bacchanalian gaiety in any gathering he attends, Denys finds that, eventually, his unconventionality is deemed dangerous. His fondness for ‘oddly grown or even misshapen ... children’ and for wild animals such as the ‘veritable wolf [he tames] to keep him company like a dog’ is seen as a sign of his witchcraft and the people of Auxerre turn against him (62-63). Following a period of dark indulgence, Denys seeks refuge, and joins the monks of Saint Germain where his own experiences seem to influence their work; the transitions of his life etched in the arts they produce:

<sup>93</sup> Walter Pater, ‘Denys L’Auxerrois’, in *Imaginary Portraits* (London: Macmillan, 1910) pp. 47-77, (p. 53). Subsequent references appear in the text.



In three successive phases or fashions might be traced, especially in the carved work, the humours he had determined. There was first wild gaiety, exuberant in a wreathing of life-like imageries, from which nothing really present in nature was excluded. That, as the soul of Denys darkened, had passed into obscure regions of the satiric, the grotesque and coarse. But from this time there was manifest ... a well-assured seriousness ... It was as if the gay old pagan world had been *blessed* in some way (70-71).

Furthermore, it is Denys who creates the church organ. 'Like the Wine-god of old', Denys is 'a lover and patron especially of the music of the pipe, in all its varieties' which can be traced in its 'three fashions or "modes" : - first, the simple and pastoral, ... then, the wild, savage din, that had cost so much to quiet people, and driven excitable people mad' and finally a new combination that Denys would compose 'to sweeter purposes': phases that mirror once again the three stages of his nature (71-72). The organ was to be:

the triumph of all the various modes of the power of the pipe, tamed, ruled, united. Only, on the painted shutters of the organ-case Apollo with his lyre in his hand, as lord of the strings, seemed to look askance on the music of the reed, in all the jealousy with which he put Marsyas to death so cruelly (72).

Here, as we can see, the Dionysian quality of the 'power of the pipe' is 'tamed' and 'ruled', recalling the aestheticization of the Medusan voice and its chthonian disorder in the 'man-made' body of the castrato.<sup>94</sup> Yet, the organ, like the castrato, retains a certain ambiguity - it remains fundamentally linked to 'the music of the reed' and to unruliness and disorder via its association with Apollo's formidable opponent, the satyr, Marsyas.

Denys's demise proves as violent as that of Marsyas. Taking the leading part in a

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<sup>94</sup> Although not pursued in Greek myth, there appears to be a link between the child Dionysus, as he is described in Euripides' *Bacchae*, and Medusa. In the *Bacchae*, the newly-born Dionysus is 'a horned child crowned with serpents (my emphasis)', (see Graves, p.103).

pageant during a local festival in which ‘the person of Winter’ is ‘hunted blindfold through the streets’, Denys becomes the victim of the townspeople who hunt him down in earnest (75):

The pretended hunting of the unholy creature became a real one, which brought out, in rapid increase, men’s evil passions. The soul of Denys was already at rest, as his body, now borne along in front of the crowd, was tossed hither and thither, torn at last limb from limb (76).

In ‘From Dionysus to “Dionea”: Vernon Lee’s Portraits’, Catherine Maxwell retraces Lee’s own visit to Auxerre which is recaptured in her memorial essay for Walter Pater entitled ‘Dionysus in the Euganean Hills’ (1921). Here Denys’s Dionysian character is confirmed as Lee ‘recognizes in the carved niches of the cathedral the images that inspired Pater’s “Denys L’Auxerrois”’.<sup>95</sup> This prompts

a long reverie on the Gods in Exile, of Dionysus, of the symbolism of the vine, of Friedrich Nietzsche’s contrasting of the Apolline and the Dionysiac characters of art, and it concludes with Lee’s own experience of Dionysus.<sup>96</sup>

Gods in exile, Lee argues, partake

of the nature of ghosts even more than all gods do, *revenants* as they are from other ages, and with the wistful eeriness of all ghosts, merely to think on whom makes our hair, like Job’s, rise up; tragic beings and, as likely as not, malevolent towards living men.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Catherine Maxwell, ‘From Dionysus to “Dionea”: Vernon Lee’s Portraits’, *Word & Image*, 13 (1997), 253-69, (p. 259).

<sup>96</sup> Maxwell., p. 259.

<sup>97</sup> Vernon Lee, ‘Dionysus in the Euganean Hills’, *Contemporary Review*, 120 (1921), 346-53, (p. 348).



This exile, 'implying an in-and-out existence of alternate mysterious appearance and disappearance' is therefore, according to Lee, 'a kind of *haunting*'.<sup>98</sup> Dionysus, she suggests, is perhaps the most curious of all the gods in exile for:

Was he not the mystery, in human or divine shape, of the unaccountable dreams and transformations, the sublimations and degradations due to the supreme mysteriousness, one might say, the supreme elemental mystery, of fermentation and its effects?<sup>99</sup>

Moreover, he is 'the symbol of moods which seek deliverance from reality in horror as well as excessive rapture, what Nietzsche taught us to distinguish as the *Dionysiac*, as opposed to the *Apolline* side of art'.<sup>100</sup> The liminality that characterizes the figure of Dionysus extends to his sexuality. As Lee observes, although a seducer, Dionysus is 'little more than a woman himself'.<sup>101</sup> His effeminacy is 'like that of those beautiful languid Arabs ... who strike one as women in disguise, the beard against their jasmin [*sic*] cheeks seeming some kind of ritual half-mask'.<sup>102</sup> Inhabiting a liminal position in time, in nature, and in sexuality, Lee's Dionysus is reminiscent of the ghostly castrati that haunt her tales. Neither man, nor woman, Dionysus is a god of transformation, embodying the elemental powers of nature in an occult space that simultaneously allows, yet sublimates 'the hopes and fancies, the ecstasies and barbarities which humdrum existence has said No to'.<sup>103</sup> His attributes are 'variability', 'playfulness, wantonness, and frenzy':<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Lee, 'Dionysus', p. 348.

<sup>99</sup> Lee, 'Dionysus', pp. 348-49.

<sup>100</sup> Lee, 'Dionysus', p. 348.

<sup>101</sup> Lee, 'Dionysus', p. 349.

<sup>102</sup> Lee, 'Dionysus', pp. 349-50.

<sup>103</sup> Lee, 'Dionysus', p. 351.

<sup>104</sup> Paglia, p. 97.

He is Lusios, ‘the Liberator’ - the god who by very simple means, or by other means not so simple, enables you for a short time to *stop being yourself*, and thereby set you free ... The aim of his cult was *ecstasis* - which could mean anything from ‘taking you out of yourself’ to a profound alteration of personality.<sup>105</sup>

The presence of Dionysus, then, provides a carnivalesque space which encourages the expression of those repressed desires, those alternative subjectivities that remain hidden in everyday life. But the Dionysian revel, as we have seen, can be fraught with tension and erupt in violence. In Pater’s tale, the Dionysian figure is torn limb from limb, a fate which is also associated with Orpheus who, in one version of the Orphic myth, suffers this brutal death at the hands of the Maenads who commit the atrocity at Dionysus’s instigation.<sup>106</sup> Yet, in other myths the figures of Dionysus and Orpheus are conflated. In these, Orpheus does not ‘come into conflict with the cult of Dionysus’, he *is* Dionysus, and he plays ‘the rude alder-pipe, not the civilized lyre’.<sup>107</sup> Moreover, Proclus, in his Commentary on Plato’s *Politics*, tells us that ‘Orpheus, because he was the principal in the Dionysian rites, is said to have suffered the same fate as the god’, and elsewhere, Apollodorus credits him with having invented the Mysteries of Dionysus: the ‘violent principle’ of which is ‘*sparagmos*, which in Greek means “a rending, tearing, mangling” and secondly “a convulsion, spasm”’.<sup>108</sup>

The relationship which can be traced between Marsyas, Dionysus and Orpheus in Greek myth prompts an examination of the significance of these figures in Lee’s writings. Their mythical deaths seem particularly suggestive: Dionysus and Orpheus are

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<sup>105</sup> Paglia, p. 97.

<sup>106</sup> Graves, p. 112.

<sup>107</sup> Graves, p. 114.

<sup>108</sup> Graves, p. 114; Paglia, p. 95.



dismembered, Marsyas is skinned alive and, in Lee's tale, is also figured as dismembered, for the Effigy's arms are missing from its body. Moreover, it seems important that the violence of Orpheus's death emerges, not in the aesthetic context of Lee's essay, 'Orpheus in Rome', but in intricate associations traced via the occult tale, 'Marsyas in Flanders'. I suggest that in this liminal supernatural space - a form of Winnicottian 'potential space' - Marsyas's violent rejections of the cross, and apparent 'convulsions' figure as a resistance to the restrictions of a fixed identity: a resistance which resonates with the sexual fluidity of Orpheus in Lee's 'Orpheus in Rome'. Although, in Lee's tale, the Effigy is still in full possession of its 'skin', the fact that it is the satyr Marsyas means that we cannot help but think of his ultimate fate at the hands of Apollo. Skinned alive, Marsyas body becomes a form of disturbing double for the body in its embryonic state, in which the blood and veins of the foetus are visible through the translucence of the skin. Furthermore, the association of Marsyas with Dionysus and Orpheus and their death by dismemberment, suggests a return to the fragmented self which, according to Lacan, is the child's experience of itself prior to forming its subjectivity. It seems significant, then, that Marsyas should be found 'buried deep beneath a vaulted passage' a space reminiscent of the maternal womb, a literal space of infantile regression that is echoed in the elemental 'space' provided by the Effigy's associations with the chthonian deity, Dionysus, in which Marsyas 'plays' and resists his Christian misrecognition.

However, these three figures from Greek myth are linked by another chain of association. Dionysus is a figure of ambivalent sexuality: 'Archaic vases show him in a woman's tunic, saffron veil, and hairnet ... He is called Pseudanor, the Fake Man'.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Paglia, p. 89.

Orpheus, although best known for his tragic love for Eurydice, is configured, by Ovid, as homosexual, and Marsyas, a follower of Cybele, is arguably castrated. But it is not only the mythical Marsyas that is linked with castration. In his book, *Laocoön's Body and the Aesthetics of Pain*, Simon Richter posits the sculpted figure of Marsyas (fig. 6), as one of 'Laocoön's others' who is 'superimposed on the picture of the statue, and connected at the point of pain'.<sup>110</sup> Richter writes:

Certainly one of these counter-images is that of the satyr, Marsyas, whose statue stands in the Uffizi in Florence, a copy of the same in the Capitoline Museum in Rome. While the eighteenth century enthusiastically discussed the Laocoön and statues of Niobe and her daughters, it generally avoided Marsyas, even though these three groups are the primary instances of antique representations of pathetic subjects.<sup>111</sup>

Marsyas, then, is a liminal figure in aesthetics : something 'not-man' and 'not-woman' that exists in the silent space between the Laocoön and the Niobe. For Winckelmann, as noted earlier in this chapter, the figure of the Laocoön is 'supplanted ... by the figure of the eunuch': he finds his classical ideal in the body of the eighteenth-century castrato. Richter links the statue of Marsyas (and by implication his mythical counterpart) to the castrato by the medium of pain. As Richter observes, 'Beauty wields a knife' that mutilates and castrates: a knife that may be the sculptor's scalpel, Apollo's blade, or the surgeon's 'little knife'.<sup>112</sup> Moreover, Richter's Marsyas, like Lee's, is confused with Christ, but in Richter's text this confusion occurs via the castrato's body. Discussing Winckelmann's problematic engagement with the conflation of beauty and pain in

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<sup>110</sup> Richter, p. 34.

<sup>111</sup> Richter, p. 34.

<sup>112</sup> Richter, p. 192.



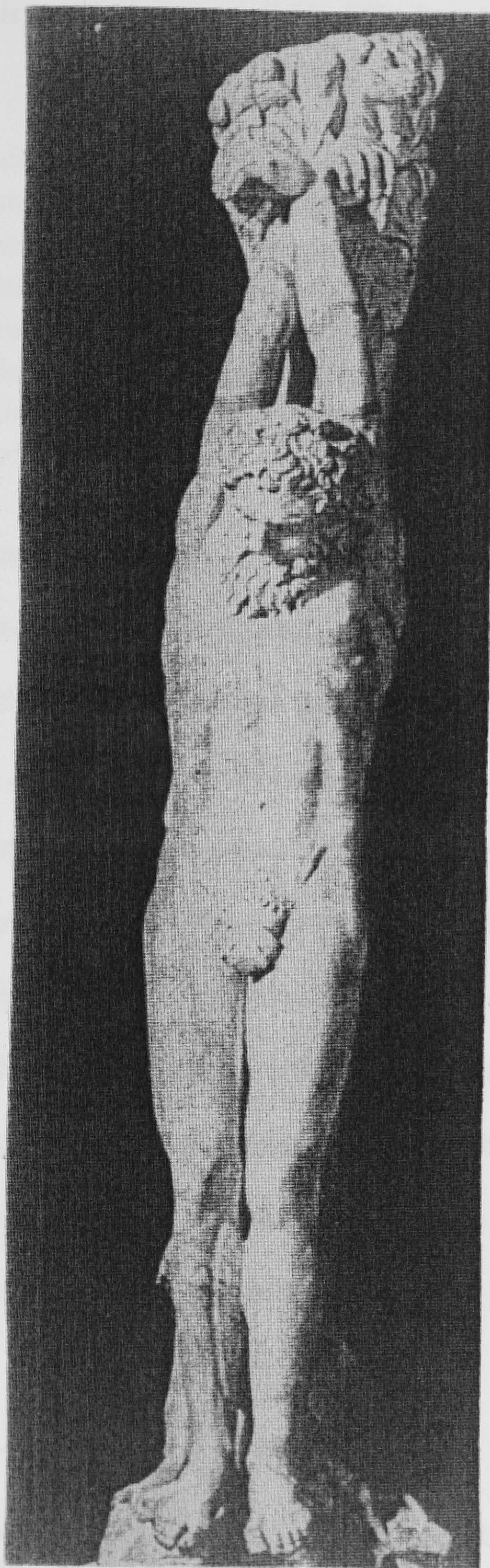


Fig. 6 *Marsyas*, The Uffizi, Florence.



aesthetics, Richter explains how, for Winckelmann, the castrato body becomes the site of negotiation for this seemingly irreconcilable difficulty:

The castrato better exemplified classical beauty, and resolved the conflict of aesthetic and semiotic demands in its *Unbezeichnung* or 'Undesignation' as Winckelmann termed his new concept. Pain seemed no longer to be a force of representation, though when Winckelmann described the castrato's body, his gaze finally came to rest on the eunuch's buttocks, the expanse of flesh over the 'heiliges Bein,' his German translation for *os sacrum* or, more commonly, *kreuz* (cross). *Unbezeichnung* turned out to be a euphemism for castration understood as a type of crucifixion.<sup>113</sup>

It seems that the crucified Christ, or more particularly those 'medieval or baroque images of a gruesomely tormented or dead Christ', becomes 'with Marsyas, Laocoön's unspoken Other'.<sup>114</sup> Yet Richter's argument is not the only source of Christ's association with castration. As A. J. L. Busst observes in his essay, 'The Image of the Androgyne in the Nineteenth Century', in Dr Oskar Pfister's Freudian analysis of work by the German pietist, Ludwig von Zinzendorf, 'the androgyny of Christ, apparent in his depiction of the wound in Christ's side as an equivalent of the female genitalia', is attributed to Zinzendorf's childhood speculations on 'the nature of the vulva' for, according to Freud, 'the external female organs are often considered in childhood as a wound'.<sup>115</sup> This wound, the wound of the castrated female, is also identified with Christ's wound through parturition, for the wound at his side echoes that formed by the birth of Eve from Adam's

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<sup>113</sup> Richter, p. 190.

<sup>114</sup> Richter, p. 58.

<sup>115</sup> A. J. L. Busst, 'The Image of the Androgyne in the Nineteenth Century' in *Romantic Mythologies*, ed. by Ian Fletcher (London: Routledge, 1967), pp. 1-95, (p. 7).



rib.<sup>116</sup> Moreover, as Busst goes on to point out this ‘castrated’ Christ image is linked to the androgynous body:

Throughout the ages, the mystical tradition has considered Christ as an androgyne, from gnosticism through Jacob Boehme to Mme. Blavatsky. As for the comparison of the wound in Christ’s side with the external organ of birth, the image of Christ producing his bride, the holy Mother Church, through the wound in his side in the same way as the first Adam produced Eve, is to be found in the most orthodox Christian theology and liturgy, and in St. Augustine himself.<sup>117</sup>

Added to the images of embryonic regression and childhood fragmentation, Lee’s Marsyas, is linked not only to Dionysus and Orpheus, but also to Christ via the androgynous body. The statue of Marsyas in Lee’s tale appears to embody that fluid sexuality that characterizes a child’s amorphous existence prior to the formation of a fixed subjectivity. It would seem that, in the supernatural space of Lee’s tales, the figure of Marsyas, whose unruliness is normally contained by the lines of sculptural form, is employed to express alternative sexualities and identities. If we return for a moment to Marsyas in Greek myth, it seems significant that Marsyas is in conflict with Apollo. Lee’s aesthetic concern with Apollonian form and line in sculpture is undermined by the physical contortions of the Marsyas effigy in ‘Marsyas in Flanders’, and by the latent regression to an infantile undifferentiation, and sexual androgyny, which find their expression in the echoes and associations that emerge via the figure of Marsyas in the light and shade of his moulding.

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<sup>116</sup> Busst, p. 7.

<sup>117</sup> Busst, p. 7.

### **‘St. Eudaemon and His Orange Tree’**

‘St. Eudaemon and His Orange Tree,’ like ‘Marsyas in Flanders’, takes for its subject the discovery of a pagan artifact that disrupts the equanimity of a Christian community.<sup>118</sup>

Living on the Caelian slopes of Rome, Eudaemon, of whose history we learn little, other than he once had a bride who died on the eve of their wedding day and whose wedding ring he still wears, makes his home amidst the remnants of pagan society. He plants ‘a garden round about the ruins of the circular temple of Venus’ which thrives under his tender care, and he turns the ‘innermost cell of the temple ... into a chapel, with a fair carved tomb of the pagans for an altar, and pictures of the Blessed Virgin and the Saviour, with big eyes and purple clothes, painted on the whitewash’ (173-74). As Eudaemon’s land is being prepared for the planting of a vineyard, a statue is uncovered which ‘disclosed itself to be a full-length woman, carved in marble, and embedded in the clay, face upwards’ (181). With characteristic panic, the peasants flee in terror, ‘some crying out that they had found an embalmed Pagan, and some, a sleeping female devil’ (181).<sup>119</sup> Eudaemon’s neighbours offer their help in destroying the figure, for ‘it was evidently an image of the goddess Venus, by far the wickedest of all the devils’ (181). In contrast,

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<sup>118</sup> ‘St Eudaemon and His Orange Tree’ originally appeared in *Pope Jacynth and Other Fantastic Tales* (London: Grant Richards, 1904). The text used here is the second edition, published by John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1907, pp. 171-91. Subsequent references appear in the text.

<sup>119</sup> This ‘embalmed pagan’ suggests an allusion to the embalmed body of ‘Julia, daughter of Claudius,’ which is referred to by John Addington Symonds in the first volume of *The Renaissance in Italy* (London, 1904), where he relates the story of a report which circulated in Rome on the 18th of April, 1485 that some Lombard workmen had discovered a Roman Sarcophagus while digging in the Appian Way, in which the body of Julia lies preserved in pristine condition. In her article ‘Browning and the Poetics of the Sepulchral Body’, *Victorian Poetry* 30 (1992), 43-61, Cornelia D. J. Pearsall notes the significance of this story for Browning’s, ‘The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church’, but, as Burdett Gardner notes, (p. 320), Lee also makes a direct reference to this legend in ‘A Wedding Chest’ (*Pope Jacynth*, pp. 128-30), which will be discussed in next chapter.



Eudaemon merely smiled, ‘and wiped the earth off the figure, which was exceeding comely, and mended one of its arms with cement, and set it up on a carved tombstone of the ancients, at the end of the grass walk through the orchard, and close to the beehives’ (181). Here, the figure can be seen, ‘shining white among the criss-cross reeds and the big fig-trees of Eudaemon’s vineyard’ (182). All proceeds peacefully until ‘the vigil of the Birth of John the Baptist’, a night on which Eudaemon provides a feast at which the peasants are allowed to ‘make merry’ and play games, a generous act which engenders disapproval as these revels are deemed an undesirable form of celebration for,

the vigil of John the Baptist, happened to coincide with the old feast of the devil Venus, and [it was thought] that the rustics still celebrated it with ceremonies connected with that evil spirit (183-84).

Joining in the games, Eudaemon notices that his wedding finger is beginning to swell from the exertion and removes his ring which he places on the ‘annular finger of the marble statue of the devil Venus’ (184). Returning later to reclaim the ring he finds that ‘The marble she-devil had bent her finger and closed her hand. She had accepted the ring ... and refused to relinquish it’ (185). Seemingly unperturbed, Eudaemon continues his tasks whilst the last rays of the sun fall ‘upon the marble statue ... making the ring glimmer on her finger ... reddening and gilding her nakedness into a semblance of life’ (186).

Eventually, Eudaemon addresses the Venus directly, reminding her of the hospitality he has shown her, and asking her to return his ring, but ‘The statue did not move. There she stood, naked and comely, whiter and whiter as the daylight faded and the moon rose up in the east’ (188). Eudaemon addresses her once more, and asks her to prove that she is not

the 'she-devil' the people suppose by restoring his ring. Once again the statue does not move, it 'grew only whiter, like silver, in the moonbeams, as she stood above the green grass, in the smoke of the incense' (188). Seeing that his pleas have not worked, Eudaemon assumes a commanding tone and orders the statue, 'as one of God's creatures', to restore his ring to him (189). In response, 'A little breeze stirred the air. The white hand of the statue shifted from her white bosom, the finger slowly uncrooked and extended itself' (189). Thanking her for her acquiescence, Eudaemon begs her to forget, 'the malice which foolish mankind have taught you to find in yourself' and asks her to accept 'a loving punishment', begging her 'in the name of Christ' to 'be a statue no longer, but a fair white tree with sweet-smelling blossoms and golden fruit' (189-90). As Eudaemon makes the sign of the cross:

There was a faint sigh, as of the breeze, and a faint but gathering rustle. And behold, beneath the shining white moon, the statue of Venus changed its outline, put forth minute leaves and twigs, which grew apace, until, while Eudaemon still stood with raised hand, there was a statue no longer ... but a fair orange-tree, with leaves and flowers shining silvery in the moonlight (190).

Like the story of Marsyas, 'St Eudaemon and His Orange Tree' has its literary predecessors. In his book, *Disenchanted Images: a Literary Iconology*, Theodore Ziolkowski traces the multiple variations of the legend of 'Venus and the Ring', on which the story of Eudaemon, among many others, appears to be based. The earliest known version of this legend seems to have been told by William of Malmesbury in his twelfth-



century text, *Chronicles of the Kings of England* (c. 1125).<sup>120</sup> Here, the story revolves around a newly-wed young noble of Rome who, after the wedding feast joins his friends to play ball. During the game he removes his wedding ring and places it on the finger of a bronze statue of Venus. When he returns to retrieve the ring, he finds that the statue has clenched its hand and he is unable to remove it. Puzzled and unsettled by this turn of events, he decides not to tell his wife, but returns again that evening only to discover that, although the statue's finger is once more extended, the ring is missing. That night, in bed, he becomes aware of a third entity between himself and his new wife, and hears a voice whisper, 'Embrace me, since you wedded me today. I am Venus, on whose finger you put the ring, and I shall not give it back'.<sup>121</sup> Unable to fulfil his marital obligations, he is forced by his wife's complaints to disclose the problem to her parents, who consult Palumbus, a priest skilled in the magic arts. Palumbus instructs the young man to take a letter to a particular crossroads where, he is told, he will see a procession of figures, one of whom is the malicious Venus, who rides on a mule making 'wonderfully indecent gestures'.<sup>122</sup> When the demon leading this procession approaches the young man, he delivers the letter, and the demon, though reluctant, is forced to comply with its request, and his followers are instructed to remove the wedding ring from Venus's finger.

Venus's 'she-devilry' in this story is, as Ziolkowski observes, linked to Christianity's general demonization of the pagan. However, Ziolkowski points out that:

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<sup>120</sup> Theodore Ziolkowski, *Disenchanted Images: A Literary Iconology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977). Lee herself seems aware of the legend's origin, and refers to the version told by the 'original mediaeval professional storyteller' in her preface to *Hauntings*, p. ix.

<sup>121</sup> Quoted in Ziolkowski, p. 18.

<sup>122</sup> Quoted in Ziolkowski, p. 19.

Of all the pagan deities, Venus managed to sustain herself most vividly in the medieval imagination, for she represented the seductive passion to which an ascetic Christianity was austere opposed ... Venus is no longer a symbol of the classical joy of life: she has become the devil incarnate, or at least his principal agent of temptation.<sup>123</sup>

In French versions of this tale, (c.1200), the young man places his ring on the finger of a statue of the Virgin Mary. When, on the wedding night, he attempts to embrace his bride, the Virgin's statue lies between them, and she reminds him that he is 'wedded' to her. The youth gives up his human bride, and dedicates his life the service of the Virgin Mary.<sup>124</sup> Here, as in Lee's tale, where Venus changes into an orange-tree whose white blossoms are associated with the chastity of Our Lady, the demon Venus is assimilated and transformed into an image of Christian virtue - the Virgin herself.<sup>125</sup> But perhaps the most famous version of this story is Prosper Mérimée's, 'The Venus of Ille' (1837), in which the statue of a bronze Venus is discovered in the ground. As in its antecedents, there is a bridegroom who gives Venus his ring and is subsequently unable to retrieve it. Mérimée's tale, however, departs from tradition. On the morning after the wedding night, the bridegroom is found dead: his 'clenched teeth and blackened features', signs of his struggle, 'a livid imprint' on his ribs and back suggesting that he has been 'squeezed in an iron hoop'.<sup>126</sup> The story of the Venus's wickedness in the marital bed is told by his widow-bride, whose madness lends the tale a sense of ambiguity that foreshadows the

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<sup>123</sup> Ziolkowski, p. 27.

<sup>124</sup> In her tale, 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers', (which will be discussed in the next chapter), Lee appears to employ certain elements of this version of the legend.

<sup>125</sup> See Ad. de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* (London: North Holland, 1974), p. 351: as a golden fruit, the orange is celestial - symbolic of perfection and infinity, and is associated with the chastity of the Virgin Mary.

<sup>126</sup> Prosper Mérimée, 'The Venus of Ille' in *Carmen and Other Stories*, trans. by Nicholas Jotcham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) pp. 132-61, (p. 157).



‘psychological’ supernatural which is later found in the works of Vernon Lee and Henry James. The bridegroom’s distraught mother, however, takes no chances. She insists that the bronze Venus be melted down and recast as a church bell. The pagan is once more transformed into the Christian.

In his discussion of the various transmutations of the tale, Ziolkowski notes other well-known texts that are linked thematically to the legend of Venus and the Ring. Among these he lists those ‘most familiar in Western culture’, the stories of Pygmalion and Don Juan.<sup>127</sup> Pygmalion’s tale, or more particularly, Rousseau’s *Pygmalion*, (referred to earlier) appears to have initiated a new theatrical fashion - the ‘attitudes’ - popular among European intellectuals, where famous statues would be imitated by living beings, thus blurring the border between animate and inanimate.<sup>128</sup> For Ziolkowski,

This bizarre conceit of representing ‘living statues’ is simply another example of the late eighteenth-century obsession with statues ... During the 1780’s [*sic*], for instance, it was a vogue in Italy to visit the galleries at night in order to view the statues by torchlight, which produced the illusion that the statues were alive and moving.<sup>129</sup>

Ziolkowski attributes this eighteenth-century interest in statues to ‘a remarkable resurgence of interest in the art of sculpture’ due to the ‘new awareness of Greek classicism’ prompted by, Winckelmann’s *Thoughts on the Imitation of the Greek Works of Painting and Sculpture* (1755), Lessing’s *Laokoon* (1766), Herder’s *On Plastic Art*

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<sup>127</sup> Here, we might also add Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale*, although Ziolkowski does not discuss this in his text.

<sup>128</sup> Ziolkowski tells us that this fashion, ‘the “mimoplastic art” of representing works of art by mimic means, especially gestures and draperies’ was created by Emma Hart, the subsequent Lady Hamilton (p. 34).

<sup>129</sup> Ziolkowski, pp. 34-35.

(1778), and Goethe's *Italian Journey* (1768-88).<sup>130</sup> But, as Prosper Mérimée's, 'The Venus of Ille' illustrates, this interest continues into the nineteenth century, generating, as Ziolkowski observes, Heinrich Heine's essays 'Elemental Spirits' (1837), and later 'Gods in Exile' (1853)<sup>131</sup>, E. T. A. Hoffmann's, 'The Sandman' (1816), Sacher-Masoch's, 'Venus in Furs' (1870), and Henry James', 'The Last of the Valerii' (1874). To these we might also add Thomas Hardy's, 'Barbara of the House of Grebe' (1891), in which a statue, once again, comes between man and wife. James' and Hardy's tales will be discussed shortly, and Hoffmann's, 'The Sandman' will be considered in a later chapter.<sup>132</sup>

Ziolkowski suggests that this second flowering may be have been due to the discovery of the *Venus de Milo* (fig. 7), which arrived in Paris in 1820. He writes that, 'The widely celebrated occasion touched off a veritable cult of Venus that lasted for several decades'.<sup>133</sup> Whatever the reasons behind these stories of animated statues, however, what seems particularly significant is that each links the statue with desire.

Winckelmann's own engagement with the plastic form is, as we have seen, inflected by

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<sup>130</sup> Ziolkowski, p. 33.

<sup>131</sup> In his texts, Heine often pursues the idea, (obtained from, among other works, Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*), that the ancient gods continued to live in the Christian world, though in exile, adopting the shape of animals (as in Egypt), or inhabiting their own statues. As Ziolkowski observes, 'The statues therefore represent a state of sleep, not a stony death' (p. 45).

<sup>132</sup> Ziolkowski also mentions Vernon Lee's 'Dionea' (1890) in which the eponymous heroine appears as a form of 'goddess in exile', instilling desires and creating disturbances that are linked to the mythical Venus. For the sculptor Waldemar, Dionea is the perfect model for the figure of Venus. His attempt to sculpt Dionea, however, ends in tragedy, in the deaths of Waldemar and of his wife. This tale will be discussed in a later chapter. Whilst this story may have implicit associations with the legend of Venus and the Ring, it is 'St Eudaemon and His Orange Tree' which seems to make explicit use of the story. This tale, however, is not mentioned in Ziolkowski's account.

<sup>133</sup> Ziolkowski, p. 44. The motif of the unearthed statue in Lee's work may also have been prompted by a similar incident which occurs in Nathaniel Hawthorne's, *The Marble Faun* (1860), which was itself inspired by the discovery of the *Venus of the Tribune*, thought to be the model for the *Venus de' Medici* (see notes to the Penguin edition of the text, (1990), ed. by Richard H. Brodhead, n. 1, p. 483). Peter Gunn notes that, as a young girl, Lee read *The Marble Faun* 'perpetually' and suggests that it may have had a profound effect on her subsequent treatment of Italy in her work (pp. 43-45).



his desire for the eighteenth-century castrato and, according to Ziolkowski, Heine's is likewise propelled by lustful longings: he writes:

Almost to the point of predictability he [Heine] compares lovely women, in their radiance and inviolability, to statues ... Not only does Heine attribute to women statuesque characteristics; he treats statues as though they were women. The narrator of *Florentine Nights* (1836) recalls a beautiful statue lying in the grass in the park of his mother's estate. Smitten by its beauty, he creeps out one night to embrace the stone deity: '... finally I kissed the lovely goddess with a passion, a tenderness, a desperation, as I have never again kissed in all my life'.<sup>134</sup>

Similarly, Hoffmann's text is driven by Nathaniel's desire for the animated doll Olympia, James' Italian count in 'The Last of the Valerii' falls in love with a statue of Juno, and Hardy's Barbara of the House of Grebe worships the pristine statue of her former husband. It is intriguing, then, to find that desire is apparently absent in the exchange between Eudaemon and his statue. This is perhaps due to Eudaemon's position as a celibate priest. However, regardless of this seemingly non-erotic exchange, we cannot but be aware that the statue chosen for the story is the statue of Venus - who is inextricably linked to the processes of desire. Moreover, the focus of our gaze on the statue and its 'whiteness' has interesting implications. In her discussion of the works of Hilda Doolittle in, *H.D. and the Victorian Fin de Siècle*, Cassandra Laity points out the significance of the statue in the Hellenist imagination, and outlines:

H.D.'s encodings of female desire through the Victorian Hellenist's principal icon for Platonic and Dorian male-male love - the nude male bodies of Greek statuary

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<sup>134</sup> Quoted in Ziolkowski, pp. 45-46.

that poets such as Swinburne, Pater, and Wilde summoned frequently as objects of the male homoerotic 'gaze'.<sup>135</sup>

This gaze, Laity suggests, expresses itself in a variety of 'trace images' that represent the object of its desire: 'whiteness, crystal, marble statuary, the burning "hard gemlike flame," or the transparently veined white body', which H.D. appropriates to 'write the elusive body of mother-daughter eroticism, love between equal men and women, and homoerotic love'.<sup>136</sup> The most explicit example of this appropriation of what Laity calls, 'statue-love', occurs in H.D.'s novel, *Paint It Today* (1921). In an allusion to Oscar Wilde's poem, 'Charmides' (*Poems*, 1881), which takes as its source a tale by Boccaccio, (evidently based on the legend of Venus and the Ring), H.D.'s narrator, Midget, imaginatively becomes a 'sister of Charmides' when she expresses her lesbian desire as she gazes at the *Venus de Milo*.<sup>137</sup> In a visual parallel to Pater's Winckelmann who sensuously 'fingers' the pagan marbles, Midget looks 'with eyes that [long] to trace like fingers, "the curve of the white belly and short space before the breasts brought the curve to a sudden shadow"': a desire that manifests itself in the 'whitest passion'.<sup>138</sup>

In his fascinating, but ultimately reductive analysis, *The Lesbian Imagination (Victorian Style): A Psychological and Critical Study of 'Vernon Lee'* (1987), Burdett Gardner suggests that figures such as St Eudaemon's Venus, and Magnus's Zaffirino, which appear in Lee's works, are examples of what he calls the 'semivir idol' whose

<sup>135</sup> Cassandra Laity, *H.D. and the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Gender, Modernism, Decadence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 65.

<sup>136</sup> Laity, p. 65.

<sup>137</sup> Laity, pp. 67-69. Wilde's Charmides was, Laity suggests, inspired by Pater's essay 'Winckelmann' in *The Renaissance*.

<sup>138</sup> Quoted in Laity, p. 69.



‘characteristic colour ... is a deadly white’.<sup>139</sup> For Gardner, this idol represents:

the feminine counterpart of [Lee’s] ... own idealized image. The exalted ‘Vernon,’ ... required an opposite number - a person ‘fit’ for ‘Vernon’ to love. As a derivative of Miss Paget’s own mask, the idol shares all of the qualities which she, in her more confident moments, took pride in, and, like the ‘Vernon image,’ embodies the opposites of all of her weaknesses ... The idol is static and dead. It is a pure, abstract essence - the essence of female superiority - and can be more satisfactorily superimposed upon an inanimate substratum than a living one.<sup>140</sup>

That the ‘semivir idol’ functions as a form of epipsychic other for Lee, is not in dispute.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Zaffirino certainly appears to perform the role of both self, and maternal other - that primary object of desire. Similarly, the Pygmalion-like relationship between Lee’s creations, Baldwin and Althea, discussed earlier, bears out Lee’s apparent tendency to create fictional selves, and to project on objects of desire attributes that mirror that self.<sup>141</sup> However, I suggest that the role of the ‘semivir idol’

in ‘St Eudaemon and His Orange Tree’ is far more complex than Gardner’s thesis implies.

After the statue’s direct engagement with Eudaemon, symbolized by the taking of his ring, it is seen, in an image reminiscent of the fashionable torchlit statues of the eighteenth century, in the fading light of day: its body reddened and gilded ‘into a semblance of life’ (186). Here, the idol seems neither ‘static’ nor ‘dead’. Its ‘life’ may be artificially imposed by the warming tints of the setting sun, but, like the waxed ‘flesh’ that stains

John Gibson’s *Tinted Venus* (c.1850) (fig. 8), this ‘lascivious warmth of hue ...

<sup>139</sup> Gardner, p. 326; see Gardner, Ch. 7 for a full discussion of Lee’s works in which Gardner traces this image.

<sup>140</sup> Gardner, p. 316.

<sup>141</sup> This Pygmalion-like relationship also exists between Anne Brown and her patron, Walter Hamlin in Lee’s *Miss Brown* (1884). Gardner claims that Lee thought of herself as Hamlin and projected onto Anne Brown an idealized version of the self. See Gardner, Chapter 7.

demoralizes the chastity of the marble' and arguably imbues it with desirability.<sup>142</sup> As the moon rises it becomes whiter; its golden colour bleached by the rays as a wave of light sweeps across its shadowed body and, in the smoke of the incense, it appears to grow whiter still, 'like silver' (188). Its 'whiteness', then, is never the stark white of death - it is first dappled by the chiaroscuro formed by the shades of dusk and the rising moon, and becomes almost mercurial, a volatile silver shimmer glimpsed through an incense-laden mist: like the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, a sculptural counterpart to Gautier's contralto, 'molten into silver sound'. Its form seems to disappear, its objecthood dissolved in the varying light and dark of day and night.

Lee's Venus, then, seems to have much in common with those properties which Laity associates with the Greek statuary of Pater, Wilde and Swinburne, displaying the 'whiteness' and 'light' that 'write a vanishing body'.<sup>143</sup> One might also suggest that another of these 'trace images' of homosexual love - the transparently veined white body - is also to be found in the body of Lee's Marsyas, for his veined body is transparently implicit in the cold white of his naked marble effigy. Laity writes that this 'vanishing body' is necessary to the expression of homosexual desire for, 'like the body of female desire' the 'differently sexed/gendered male body ... must evade the object status of conventional inscriptions'.<sup>144</sup> Arguably, in same-sex relationships this process is inherent in their very nature, for the 'blurring' between lover and beloved undermines the subject/object dichotomy of conventional desire. As Laity observes, the 'traditional I-

<sup>142</sup> In the 1850s, John Gibson (1791-1866) produced the *Tinted Venus* and other statues using coloured wax to stain the marble in order to imitate the art practised by the ancient Greeks. The quotation used is taken from Nathaniel Hawthorne's comments after seeing one of Gibson's Venuses (see notes to *The Marble Faun*, n. 1, p. 475).

<sup>143</sup> Laity, p. 70.

<sup>144</sup> Laity, p. 70.



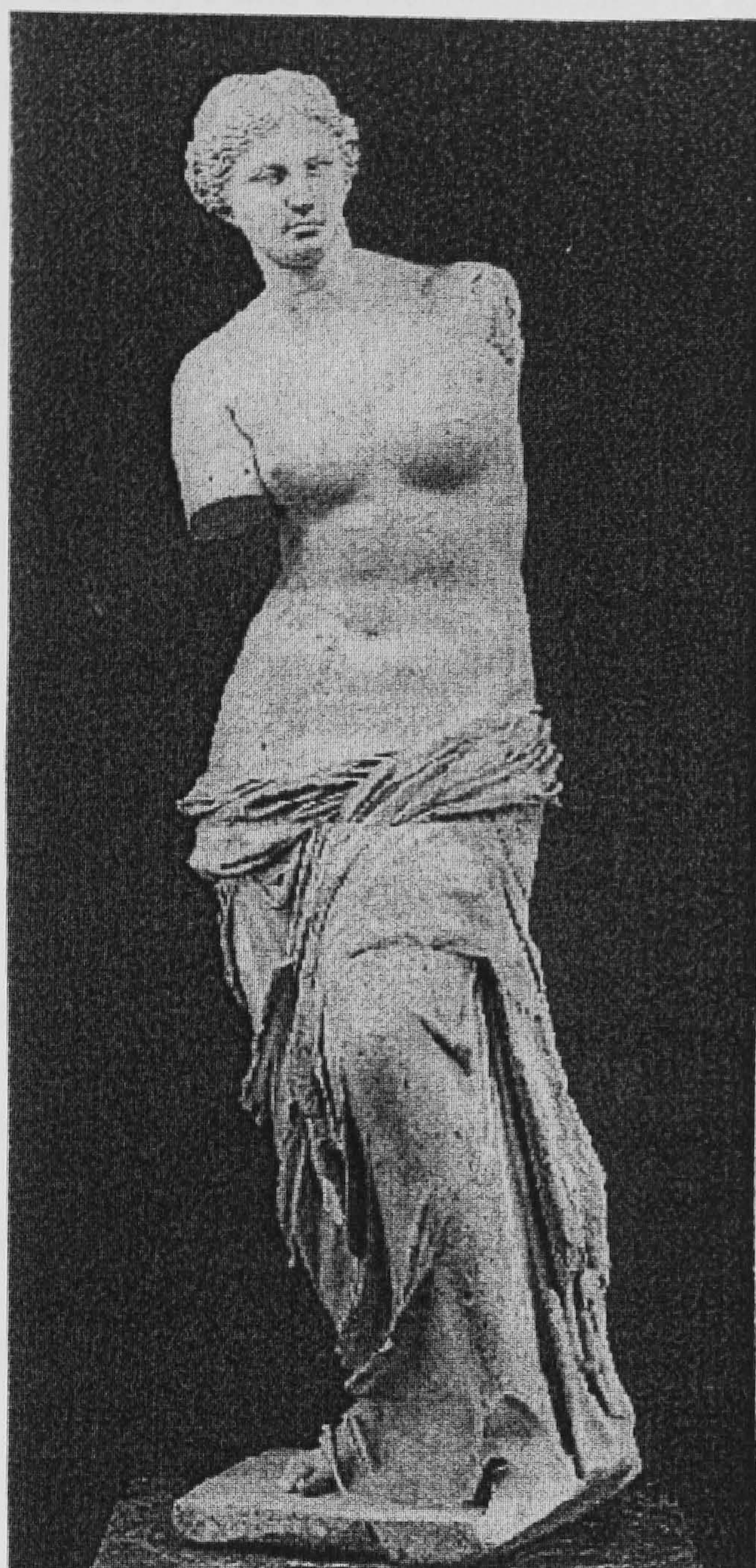


Fig. 7 *Venus de Milo*, The Louvre, Paris.



Fig. 8 John Gibson, *Tinted Venus*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.



you subject/object position therefore unravels in the transition to the homoerotic'.<sup>145</sup>

Moreover, 'used by Plato in the *Symposium* to indicate homosexual love' and belonging 'specifically to the homoerotic vocabulary or code of late-Victorian Aestheticism' the Greek term '*poikilos*' also seems particularly appropriate when applied to Lee's Venus, for the word can be used to describe 'the play of light or texture', and, as Robert Crawford points out, 'has a range of meanings including "pied," "dappled," "flashing," "intricate," [and] "ambiguous" '.<sup>146</sup>

If we return for a moment to Mary Bittner Wiseman's discussion of Bellini's Madonna paintings, what seems particularly suggestive is Wiseman's argument that Bellini's reenactment of the drama of the separation of child from mother sees the mother transformed into 'dazzles of light', a manifestation of Kristeva's maternal semiotic which can express itself in 'a complete absence of meaning and seeing', in 'feeling, displacement, rhythm, sounds [and] flashes'.<sup>147</sup> It is possible that Lee, a close friend of Walter Pater, may have been aware of the implications of the play of light on her Venus. Consciously, or unconsciously, however, Lee's Venus appears to represent simultaneously a fantasy of infantile regression, and a fantasy of lesbian desire. If Lee's Venus is an example of what Burdett Gardner calls, the 'semivir idol', a projection of both the self and desired other, the 'flashes' and 'dazzles' of light that characterize this figure suggest a return to the maternal semiotic: a regression to the pre-Oedipal stage in which the mother is experienced as part of the self and is, at the same time, sanctioned as the object of desire.

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<sup>145</sup> Laity, p. 70.

<sup>146</sup> Laity, p. 73; <sup>Crawford</sup> quoted in Linda Dowling, 'Ruskin's Pied Beauty and the Constitution of a "Homosexual Code', *The Victorian Newsletter* (1989), 1-8.(p.1).

<sup>147</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini' in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez, trans. by Thomas Gora and others (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), pp. 238-70, (pp. 239-40).



Furthermore, the association of Lee's Venus with the Virgin Mary, both through the legend of Venus and the Ring, and through the statue's own metamorphosis into the orange tree, seems significant. In her essay, 'Identification with the Divided Mother: Kristeva's Ambivalence', Alison Weir notes that Kristeva considers woman's identification with the Virgin Mary a way of dealing with what she describes as 'feminine paranoia'.<sup>148</sup> Weir writes:

Here, it must be noted that paranoia is a condition produced by the repression of homoerotic desire for the same-sex parent. Thus, feminine paranoia is an effect of the repression of a woman's desire for her mother - and, by extension, for other women.<sup>149</sup>

Like Dora's Sistine Madonna, Lee's Venus arguably represents a return to a pre-Oedipal existence, to the safety of a 'potential space' in which her lesbian identity can be expressed. However, this space, as we have seen, can be both comforting and dangerous, for this fusion with the maternal body brings with it the risk of engulfment. As a projection of the self and simultaneously the object of her transgressive desire for the female body, Lee's Venus suggests a process of duplication which entraps even as it allows the expression of that desire. As Kristeva writes:

(Re)duplication is a blocked repetition. Whereas repetition extends in time, reduplication is outside of time, a reverberation in space, a game of mirrors with no perspective, no duration. For a while, a double can freeze the instability of the

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<sup>148</sup> Allison Weir, 'Identification with the Divided Mother: Kristeva's Ambivalence', in *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing*, ed by Kelly Oliver (New York: Routledge, 1993) pp. 79-91, (p. 83).

<sup>149</sup> Weir, p. 83.

same, ... probing those unsuspected and unplumbable depths. The double is the unconscious depth of the same, that which threatens it, can engulf it.<sup>150</sup>

Reduplication, then, is a process that impedes the development of an independent subjectivity. Lee's desire for other women, expressed through the figure of Venus, forms what Kristeva calls 'an echo of the deathly symbiosis with the mother', for, 'passion between two women is one of the most intense figures of doubling'.<sup>151</sup> Moreover, the statue's transition from a pagan Venus to a symbol of the Virgin Mary at the end of the tale, suggests that, for Lee, even this covert expression of lesbian identity must be subsumed into an acceptable form - into an expression of maternal and/or religious love for as Weir observes, in 'Stabat Mater', Kristeva argues that 'the medieval cult of the Virgin Mary served to absorb the economy of the maternal - of primary narcissism - into the social order, under the Law of the Father'.<sup>152</sup>

In this context, Lee's Venus is undeniably repressive, but the figure of Venus also allows the expression of an androgynous identity which is famed for its potency. Venus's Greek counterpart, Aphrodite, is a powerful goddess who, in one myth, is born of masculine castration for she is said to have sprung 'from the foam which gathered about the genitals of Uranus, when Cronus threw them into the sea'.<sup>153</sup> Moreover, her male followers are often emasculated. In her incarnation as Aphrodite Urania, she destroys a king who mates with her upon a mountain top, 'as a queen-bee destroys the drone: by tearing out his sexual organs' and as Cybele, 'the Phrygian Aphrodite of Mount Ida' she is worshipped as a 'queen-bee' - her priests mutilating themselves via acts of

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<sup>150</sup> Quoted in Weir, p. 86.

<sup>151</sup> Quoted in Weir, p. 86.

<sup>152</sup> Weir, p. 82.

<sup>153</sup> Graves, p. 49.



‘ecstatic self-castration’.<sup>154</sup> In the light of these myths, it seems suggestive that, in Lee’s tale, the statue of Venus is positioned ‘close to the beehives’ (181). Moreover, in certain forms she is depicted as physically androgynous. As Camille Paglia notes:

On her native Cyprus, Aphrodite was worshipped as the Venus Barbata, the Bearded Venus ... Elsewhere, as the Venus Calva or Bald Venus, Aphrodite was shown with a man’s bald head, like the priests of Isis. Aristophanes calls her Aphroditos, a Cypriot male name. Aphrodite appeared in battle armour in Sparta ... [and] The Venus Armata or Armed Venus became a Renaissance convention.<sup>155</sup>

Venus, then, is a ‘phallic woman’, a figure which shadows Lee’s castrati, and one which we will encounter elsewhere in Lee’s work where it will be discussed more fully.

One might argue that this androgyny in itself represents an infantile regression, for as Kari Weil points out in her book, *Androgyny and the Denial of Difference*, ‘psychoanalysis equates androgyny with a repressed desire to return to the imaginary wholeness and self-sufficiency associated with the pre-Oedipal phase before sexual difference’.<sup>156</sup> In her summary of Aristophanes’ myth of the androgyne recounted in Plato’s *Symposium* in order to explain the origins of love, Catriona Macleod tells us that,

human beings were originally of three sexes - male, female, and male-female ... The primordial human being was a spherical creature, bountifully equipped with two sets of hands, legs, faces, sexual organs ... In the second phase of human evolution, following the divine punishment of differentiation, each creature was doomed to seek its lost half, in a quest to achieve completion. Significantly, Aristophanes

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<sup>154</sup> Graves, p. 71.

<sup>155</sup> Paglia, p. 87.

<sup>156</sup> Kari Weil, *Androgyny and the Denial of Difference* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), p. 3.

notes that this urge for plenitude could be fulfilled through either homosexual or heterosexual union.<sup>157</sup>

The search for plenitude which is figured through Venus's androgyny can therefore be seen as indicative of lesbian desire, and echoes that which is expressed via the pre-Oedipal female's desire for the maternal body. However, it is perhaps more explicitly indicative of lesbian desire for, as we have seen in the previous chapter, those women who display physically androgynous bodies, such as the 'hermaphroditic' tribade, are figured as lesbian and, as Macleod points out, 'in German, the lesbian was characterized in medical discourse as a "Mannweib," a direct translation of the Greek term "androgynē"'.<sup>158</sup> If, as the 'semivir idol' Venus is both a projection of Lee herself and, simultaneously, the maternal object of her lesbian desire, the sculpture's androgyny is doubly suggestive of the hermaphrodite. Her Greek counterpart, Aphrodite, is the maternal female body which is both the generative source of the mythical figure 'Hermaphroditus', whose name is implicit in the term 'hermaphrodite', and is, at the same time, contained by it - the female part of a body that is 'not-man' and 'not-woman'. It seems significant, then, that, as Laity observes, the hermaphrodite is a seminal figure in decadent fantasies of homosexuality. In *Paint It Today*, H.D.

joins the tradition of Aesthete poets who used the statue of the *Hermaphrodite* to fabricate fantasies of bisexuality and androgyny ... Even as lines from 'Fragoletta' and 'Hermaphroditus' run through her mind, H.D.'s heroine Midget - like Swinburne and Gautier before her - is transfixed by the *Hermaphrodite*,

<sup>157</sup> Catriona Macleod, 'The "Third Sex" in an Age of Difference: Androgyny and Homosexuality in Winckelmann, Friedrich Schlegel, and Kleist, in *Outing Goethe and His Age*, ed. by Alice A.K. Kuzniar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 194-214, (p. 197).

<sup>158</sup> Macleod, pp. 196-97.



whose gentle breathing image modeled in strange, soft, honey-colored stone' provokes painful memories of her forsaken bisexuality.<sup>159</sup>

This link between Lee's Venus and the Louvre *Hermaphrodite* prompts us to return to Marsyas and his androgynous counterparts. One might argue, then, that like H.D., Lee, employing a complex code of associations, uses the 'hermaphroditic' figures of not only Venus, but also Marsyas, Orpheus, Dionysus and the castrato to express her lesbian identity and her transgressive desires. That these desires should need to manifest themselves via the male body of homosexual desire is perhaps due to the lack of a female model that can embody them satisfactorily. In her essay 'Eternal Love or Sentimental Discourse? Gender Dissonance and Women's Passionate "Friendships"', Susanne T. Kord observes that, 'despite Sappho, there was no tradition' for the expression of lesbian desire and that in the rare cases where 'partners clearly stated or alluded to the homoerotic nature of their relationship, their model is *male*, not female, homosexuality'.<sup>160</sup> Moreover, Laity observes that even though exclusively lesbian writers such as Renée Vivien (who modeled much of her poetry after Swinburne), 'identified themselves as female Aesthetes, claiming Swinburne's Sappho in "Anactoria" as their model of androgyny rather than Fragoletta or Hermaphroditus', this appropriation of the Decadent body can still be considered a form of 'male masking, because, arguably, even Swinburne's Sappho is a "mask" for male homoeroticism'.<sup>161</sup>

The prominence of Greek love in expressions of homosexual desire may be due, in part, to a need to sanitize relationships that would otherwise be deemed unacceptable. In

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<sup>159</sup> Laity, p. 69.

<sup>160</sup> Susanne T. Kord, 'Eternal Love or Sentimental Discourse? Gender Dissonance and Women's Passionate "Friendships"', in *Outing Goethe and His Age*, pp. 228-49, (p. 241).

<sup>161</sup> Laity, p. 79.

*A Problem in Greek Ethics*, Symonds notes that, ‘Very early ... in Greek history boy-love, as a form of sensual passion, became a national institution’.<sup>162</sup> However, for Symonds, ‘Greek Love’ is understood as ‘a passionate and enthusiastic attachment subsisting between man and youth, recognised by society and protected by opinion, which, though it was not free from sensuality, did not degenerate into mere licentiousness’.<sup>163</sup> This model of same-sex love is apparently also evident in Greek sculpture:

The license of Paganism found appropriate expression in female forms, but hardly touched the male ... Thus the testimony of Greek art might be used to confirm the assertion of Greek literature, that among free men, at least, and gentle, this passion tended even to purify feelings which in their lust for women verged on profligacy.<sup>164</sup>

For Symonds, the ‘natural desires were symbolised in Aphrodite Praxis, Kallipugos, or Pandemos. The higher sensual enthusiasm assumed celestial form in Aphrodite Ouranios’, the wild and native instincts ... received half-human shape in Pan and Silenus, the Satyrs and the Fauns’, and ‘hermaphroditic figures ... symbolized ‘the violent and comprehensive lust of brutal appetite’.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Symonds, *Ethics*, p. 4.

<sup>163</sup> Symonds, *Ethics*, p. 8. Interestingly, in her introduction to *Art and Man*, Vernon Lee describes Kit Anstruther-Thomson as having ‘finely chiselled, rather statuesque features, and a certain ... virginal expression’ which ‘made one think rather of a very beautiful and modest boy, like some of the listeners of Plato’ (p. 8). Given that Kit’s intellectual engagement with Lee, has Platonic resonances, her use of this image suggests a similar ‘purification’ of their relationship.

<sup>164</sup> Symonds, *Ethics*, p. 66.

<sup>165</sup> Symonds, *Ethics*, pp. 66-67.



Given the unruliness of desires expressed in these female and/or hybrid figures, it is unsurprising that transgressive homosexual desire should manifest itself in the coded purity of 'Greek Love'. Yet, despite its sanitary quality, even those texts, such as Plato's *Symposium*, which advocate its morality find themselves infiltrated by the disorder inherent in the androgynous figure of the boy as object of desire. Despite its best efforts to eliminate disruptive influences, such as wine and the flute-girl, that might affect the progression of a serious philosophical discussion whose aim is to distinguish between 'physical, or earthly desire' and the 'form of spiritual or heavenly love that leads to the knowledge of truth', Plato's symposium finds this clear dichotomy undermined from within by Alcibiades, who tells the story of his love for Socrates.<sup>166</sup> Whilst his eulogy of Socrates reinforces the latter's commitment to a higher love divorced from the physical appetites, the images he uses to describe Socrates are laden with ambiguity. In Alcibiades' opinion, Socrates is like one of the 'Sileni'. He is like 'Marsyas, the Satyr' the only difference between them being, as he tells Socrates, that '*you* don't need any instrument: you produce the same effect with plain words ... when we hear you speaking, ... woman, man or child - we're all overwhelmed and spellbound'.<sup>167</sup> His voice is likened to the voice of the 'Sirens' and to be smitten by him is to have been 'bitten by a snake'.<sup>168</sup> In the context of the symposium's discussion, Alcibiades' speech, as Robin Waterfield suggests, substitutes Socrates for Love for, as he points out, Diotima's speech,

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<sup>166</sup> Weil, pp. 22-23.

<sup>167</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, trans. and ed. by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 61. The plural 'Sileni' is taken from 'Silenus' which was originally the name of a follower, or possibly a teacher of Dionysus, and perhaps the original Satyr. Like Marsyas, Silenus is associated with music and also appears as the chief priest of the Dionysian mysteries. See Robin Waterfield, index to Plato's *Symposium*, p. 103.

<sup>168</sup> Plato, pp. 61, 64.

ventriloquized by Socrates, which has immediately preceded that of Alcibiades, tells us that 'Love is a philosopher' and that 'in the higher mysteries of love the lover becomes a philosopher'.<sup>169</sup> Symbolized by Socrates, Greek Love, then, however pure, contains within it the unruly qualities that are to be found in Marsyas, and in Orpheus, for if Silenus is the chief priest in the Dionysian mysteries, he must of necessity be linked with the Orphic myth, for Orpheus, too, we may remember, is sometimes accorded this role. Furthermore, the power of Socrates' rhetoric, which overwhelms and enchants, is reminiscent of the castrato voice, or more particularly its 'cry': a cry that is also implicit in the sirenic quality of his musical voice, and in the serpentine (or Medusan) power of his 'bite'. Interestingly, in Alcibiades' discussion of his relationship with Socrates, the roles of lover and beloved are seemingly interchangeable: he says, 'He [Socrates] takes people in by pretending to be their lover, and then he swaps roles and becomes their beloved instead'.<sup>170</sup> Arguably, this interchangeability is in itself disruptive of Socrates' purity for as Weil points out:

This dislocation of the lover-beloved opposition is figured in Alcibiades' very presence. Drunken, shouting, adorned 'with a massive garland of ivy and violets' claiming to speak the truth, Alcibiades' physical appearance and the story he tells about Socrates make a mockery of the master. The sign of Aphrodite in the violets of his crown, the sign of Dionysus - himself a God of sexual contradictions - in its ivy, he makes a travesty of the Socrates-Diotima duo, as well as of Aristophanes' 'halves.' In Alcibiades, male and female, self and other, body and mind are intertwined into their confused and hermaphroditic paradoxism.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Robin Waterfield, introduction to Plato, *Symposium*, pp. xi-xl, (pp xxxvii-xxxviii).

<sup>170</sup> Plato, p. 70.

<sup>171</sup> Weil, p. 28.



The latent sexual instability that is, in Plato's text, manifested in mythological terms, mirrors that which we have discovered in the responses of Winckelmann, H.D., Pater, and Vernon Lee to Greek sculpture. If we return to Lee's statue of Venus, and her effigy of Marsyas, it would seem that the complicated network of associations implicit in these figures serves, like the castrato, to express a Dionysian liberation of static identity, and a sexual ambiguity that is figured in their metamorphic bodies. Marsyas's effigy may end its days buried and unacknowledged, fixed by a phallic stake, but Venus's final transformation into a tree at the end of the tale has its own implications, for one of Dionysus's titles is '*Dendrites*', or 'tree-youth', and the 'Spring Festival', at which 'the trees suddenly burst into leaf ... celebrated his emancipation'.<sup>172</sup> Eudaemon's tree, though ostensibly a 'Christian' tree bursting into the blossoms associated with the Virgin Mary, carries with it the instability inherent in Dionysus as well as the Dionysian resonances that we traced in the figure of Marsyas in *Marsyas in Flanders*.

### **Objects of Desire: Pagan Spaces and the Metamorphic Body**

The sexual fluidity which can be traced in Lee's sculptural figures is also evident in the statues that appear in the works of two of her contemporaries: Henry James and Thomas Hardy. James' tale, 'The Last of the Valerii' concerns itself with the discovery of an antique Juno in the grounds of a villa owned by Conte Valerio, an Italian count who has recently married the narrator's American god-daughter, Martha.<sup>173</sup> The statue's location is

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<sup>172</sup> Graves, p. 107.

<sup>173</sup> Henry James, 'The Last of the Valerii', in *Daisy Miller and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1983), pp. 13-42. Subsequent references appear in the text.

supernaturally announced to the Count in a dream, for he dreams that ‘they had found a wonderful Juno, and that she rose and came and laid her marble hand on mine’ (24), and this hand, which is indeed the first fragment found, he keeps ‘in a silver box’ having made ‘a relic’ of it (28). The Count, a ‘pagan’ or ‘natural man’ reminiscent of Hawthorne’s Donatello in *The Marble Faun* (1860), who has little interest in contemporary Christianity, becomes increasingly obsessed by the marble statue (16-19). He places the statue in the ‘casino’ a ‘deserted garden-house, built in not ungraceful imitation of an Ionic temple’ (25-26). For the Count, the statue becomes an object of worship. He treats her ‘as if she were a sacrosanct image of the Madonna. He keeps her under lock and key, and pays her solitary visits’ (28). As time goes on, the Count begins to neglect his wife in favour of the marble statue. One night, whilst walking in the grounds, the narrator comes across the casino in which the statue is lit by moonlight. Foreshadowing Lee’s Venus, the Juno stands ‘bathed in the cold radiance, shining with a purity that made her convincingly divine’ (35). The effect, we are told, is ‘almost terrible’ prompting the thought that ‘beauty so expressive could hardly be inanimate’ (35). Lying prostrate at the Juno’s feet is the Count who had come into her presence in obedience to his ‘fabulous passion’ (36). In the grip of his infatuation, the Count builds an altar and begins to offer pagan sacrifices to his Juno. His wife, Martha, increasingly disturbed, has lost her bloom and become lifeless, and her godfather observes that ‘To rival the Juno she is turning to marble herself’ (37). Martha, too, is seemingly aware of the substitution that is occurring between the Juno and herself for she says, ‘His Juno is the reality; I am the fiction!’ (38). In desperation she decides on a course of action: the Juno is to be buried once more. Once



the statue is in its grave, the Count is restored to his wife, although he retains the Juno's marble hand as a memento of his passion.

In Hardy's 'Barbara of the House of Grebe', a statue is similarly the subject of marital discord.<sup>174</sup> Barbara, the daughter of wealthy parents, initially elopes with Edmond Willowes, a handsome young man of no fortune or status, whom she marries in preference to the more suitable, if considerably less beautiful, Lord Uplandtowers. Barbara and Edmond's straitened circumstances force them to seek a reconciliation with Barbara's parents. This is effected on the condition that Edmond spend some time abroad with a tutor so that he can be educated to a standard befitting Barbara's husband. With his good looks no longer in sight, Barbara's passion for Edmond begins to wane, and noticing this, she asks that her husband send her his portrait. Edmond agrees but intends to send a life-size statue of himself, which is currently being sculpted, and asks Barbara to wait. Whilst away, Edmond is dreadfully disfigured by a fire in a Venetian theatre. Upon his return, although wearing a mask made 'of some flexible material like silk, coloured so as to represent flesh', Barbara is perturbed by his appearance, and when he finally removes the mask, she cannot look at him, nor can she hide her repulsion (167). Edmond leaves and tells her he will return in one year, but dies before he is able to do so.

After some time, Barbara remarries, becoming Lady Uplandtowers and, in due course, having received a letter from Edmond's Italian sculptor, she agrees to take possession of a life-size statue, 'representing Edmond Willowes in all his original beauty ... a specimen of manhood almost perfect in every line and contour', a veritable 'Phoebus

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<sup>174</sup> Thomas Hardy, 'Barbara of the House of Grebe', in *Tales from Wessex* (London: Pan, 1973), pp. 151-185. Subsequent references appear in the text.

-Apollo' as Lord Uplandtowers observes (175). Following its arrival, Barbara falls repeatedly into a trance-like adoration of the statue. Unhappy at his wife's evident attachment to the sculpture, Uplandtowers asks that it be removed from the hall and Barbara places it in a deep recess in her boudoir, where she keeps it under lock and key. Despite the statue's apparent disappearance, 'a sort of silent ecstasy, a reserved beatification' continues to express itself in Barbara's face (176). Uplandtowers, suspicious, and impatient for their own marriage to be consummated, discovers the location of Edmond's statue and finds Barbara with her arms draped around it, uttering words of love. Under Uplandtowers' direction, the statue is secretly disfigured, and tinted to resemble Edmond's later maimed and mangled features. When Barbara next approaches her 'temple' she can only respond with 'a loud and prolonged shriek' and a loss of consciousness (179). Although from that moment Barbara joins Uplandtowers in the marital bed, her refusal to renounce fully her love for Edmond is punished by nightly encounters with the disfigured statue. On the third consecutive night Barbara, becoming progressively unhinged, becomes hysterical and suffers an epileptic fit. From the moment of recovery, Barbara displays a considerable change. Uplandtowers becomes the only object of an obsessive, and oppressive love, one which increases once the statue of Edmond is removed. In time Barbara and Uplandtowers die, and having no male heir, the title passes to the latter's nephew. During the enlargements that take place at the latter's direction, 'the broken fragments of a marble statue were unearthed', a statue which seems to be that of 'a mutilated Roman satyr; or, if not, an allegorical figure of Death' (184).

What characterizes each of these tales is the relationship between the lover and the



object of his/her desire. Count Valerio's desire for the Juno is comparable to that of Pygmalion for his statue. This is particularly evident in the seeming exchange between Martha and the statue. It is Martha's life-force which is being drained to fuel Count Valerio's desire so that woman and statue are conflated in his imagination. However, Valerio's idealization of the Juno as an object of worship, and his fetishization of the Juno's hand, are also indicative of the anxieties that underlie his desire. Transfigured by the moonlight, 'shining with a purity that made her convincingly divine', James' Juno, like Lee's Venus displays that 'light', that 'crystal' purity that associates her with the decadent images of homosexual desire. Moreover, the Juno's 'terrible' beauty transforms her into a *femme fatale*, or 'phallic woman', a figure that emasculates the men that desire her. Finding himself under the Juno's spell, Valerio experiences a disempowerment, a prostration, and perhaps even a 'castration' that is figured in the unidentified blood that stains his pagan altar. The elevation of the Juno to religious status and the fetishization of her hand become, as Laura Mulvey argues, a 'complete disavowal of castration' effected by 'the substitution of a fetish object' or by 'turning the represented figure in itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous', building up 'the physical beauty of the object', so that it is transformed into something satisfying in itself'.<sup>175</sup> That the figure of the Juno harbours these implications is suggested by the figure's eventual reinterment. For James, the perils of emasculation must be buried, seemingly unacknowledged, and obscured under the mask of a woman's jealousy.

Hardy's statue, whilst it remains in pristine condition, functions similarly as a fetish. It is comparable to a 'Phoebus-Apollo', an example of ephebic masculinity

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<sup>175</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16.3 (1975) pp. 6-18, (pp. 13-14).

(fig. 9).<sup>176</sup> Barbara's desire is based on ideal beauty and, as such, it necessarily recalls the Winckelmannian sculptural ideal that is located in the castrato's body. Her love for the statue, and her rejection of Uplandtowers' physical love suggests a refusal of penetration/impregnation that is consistent not only with a woman's desire for the castrated male body, but also with her primordial desire for the maternal female body that also displays a 'castration'. Penetration is symbolically effected when the statue is placed in a figurative womb, a 'deep recess' in Barbara's boudoir, but it remains under Barbara's control - it is she who holds the key that opens the closet door and each time she does so, it is she who enters, arguably enacting a return to the mother's body. The disfigured statue, however, makes its deformity explicit. The mangled flesh highlights the mutilation implicit in Winckelmann's sculptural ideal and its livid colours make illusion impossible. Faced with its reality, Barbara displays hysterical symptoms that echo the paranoia which Weir suggests is produced by 'the repression of a woman's desire for her mother - and, by extension, for other women'.<sup>177</sup> The unearthed fragments of Edmond's statue, thought to be those of a 'mutilated Roman satyr' (reminiscent of Marsyas), or a figure of 'Death', represent perhaps the perils of pagan ambivalence, or the 'death' implicit in Barbara's transgressive desire, that 'deathly symbiosis with the mother'.<sup>178</sup>

<sup>176</sup> The term 'ephebic masculinity' is taken from Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), which discusses representations of ideal masculinity. Godeau notes that 'The feminized masculine' is one of 'a number of available types in the lexicon of ideal bodies, appropriate to ... the representation of ephebic characters.' This 'feminized male body had a venerable pedigree in antiquity: hermaphrodite, androgyne, faun, all of which comprised overlapping categories on a spectrum that fell within the genus ephebe' (p. 202). In *Flesh and the Ideal*, Alex Potts observes that the statue singled out by Winckelmann as 'the epitome of ideal manhood' is the Apollo Belvedere whose body represents 'an ideal conflation of the austere sublime and sensuously beautiful' (p. 118). Potts points out that in the context of Edmund Burke's eighteenth-century aesthetic, the Apollo 'problematizes the relation between images of masculinity' and 'the category of the beautiful,' which for Burke is intrinsically feminine (p. 118).

<sup>177</sup> Weir, p. 83.

<sup>178</sup> Kristeva, quoted in Weir, p. 86.



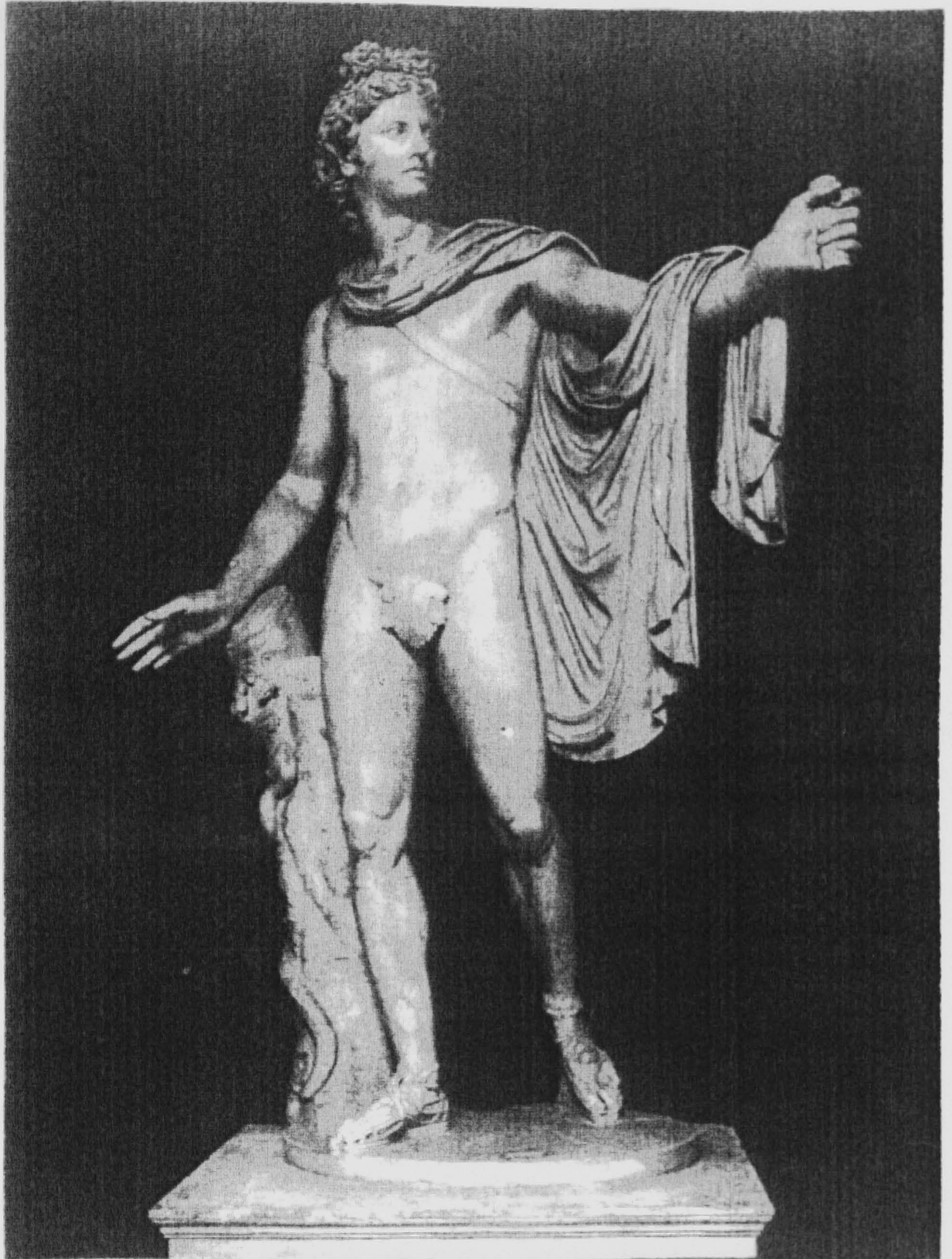


Fig. 9 *Apollo Belvedere*, The Vatican Museum, Rome.



In both James' and Hardy's tales, however, these transgressive desires are externalized. In each tale pagan license is located not in the statues themselves, but in the human figures that desire them. In Lee's work, desire resides within the statue itself: it is both subject and object of that desire creating that fantasy of oneness that characterizes the child's pre-Oedipal relationship with the mother. Lee's 'marble' images, it seems, can be chiselled away to reveal alternative identities that rely on no other sculptor but the chosen figures themselves, inspired by the nexus of myths that inform their individual existence. I claim that within the pagan 'potential space' of the supernatural, the antique statues in Lee's tales function as 'transitional objects', allowing and enabling the expression of those transgressive subjectivities which must elsewhere remain concealed.

### **The Pagan and the Supernatural**

That, for Lee, the pagan symbolizes a childhood space which sanctions the revelation of sexual amorphousness and the processes of metamorphosis, is clearly indicated in her essay 'Divinities of Tuscan Summer Fields' in which she writes of the summer antics of the young children of Tuscany:<sup>179</sup>

A brand-new race appears miraculously from nowhere: tiny boys and girls in that succinct garment, waistcoat and breeches in one, fastened in the back with missing buttons, which reduces sex to a matter of a ribboned top-knot more or less; Gesù Bambinos and San Giovanninos and Santi Innocenti for Donatello and the Della Robbias; cupids, *putti*, baby fauns for the more pagan Raphaelesques and followers of Correggio, all suddenly there, like the flowers which appear after a

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<sup>179</sup> Vernon Lee, 'Divinities of Tuscan Summer Fields', in *The Tower of Mirrors* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1914), pp. 231-36.



day of showers and sunshine; little moving flowers themselves, flexible, tender, fluffy, rosy, pearly, golden-brown, with indescribable loveliness of brilliant, weather-stained rags, suddenly arising (by that magic rite of diminishing raiment) out of the cobbles of slums and the dust and litter of roadside hamlets.<sup>180</sup>

As Sophie Goeffroy-Menoux observes, for Lee, 'marked by the fin-de-siècle imagination', pagan antiquity seemingly represents 'a happy time of harmonic fusion with mother earth'.<sup>181</sup> In 'Divinities of the Tuscan Fields' she argues, 'the young children of Tuscany ... are transfigured, metamorphosed'.<sup>182</sup> What interests me in this description is the children's sexual amorphousness; girls and boys are indistinguishable from one another in their 'unisex' clothes. Moreover, the discernible shift from the Christian to the pagan in this passage suggests that it is the latter that truly symbolizes this image of childhood freedom. For Lee and her contemporaries, the idea of youth and beauty was intrinsically linked to Greek antiquity which was seen as the 'childhood' of western civilization, and the Greeks stood for 'human virtues and normal healthy impulses that had been repressed in an evangelical Christian culture'.<sup>183</sup> The pagan, then, functions as a transitional and transformative space in which identity is constantly allowed to shift. This space is perhaps particularly significant in Lee's works for, despite her unacknowledged homosexuality, she uses a space which is recognizably lesbian. As Martha Vicinus points out:

One of the most characteristic moves of the turn-of-the-century lesbian writers was to rework familiar mythologies, natural imagery, and Decadent metaphors ... a refashioned past, whether Greek or Renaissance - the most popular eras -

<sup>180</sup> Lee, 'Divinities', pp. 231-32.

<sup>181</sup> Sophie Goeffroy-Menoux, 'L'Enfant dans les Textes de Vernon Lee' (The Child in Vernon Lee's Texts). *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens*, 47 (1998), 251-63, (p. 253). All translations my own.

<sup>182</sup> Goeffroy-Menoux, p. 253.

<sup>183</sup> Peter J. Holliday, 'John Addington Symonds and the Ideal of Beauty in Greek Sculpture: An Introduction', *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic Studies*, 2.1 Spring (1989), 89-107, (p. 95).

signaled both learning and an imaginative space where the lesbian imagination might flourish.<sup>184</sup>

For Lee this pagan space, that manifests itself in sculpture, is intimately linked to the super-natural, a mode which, as we have seen, undermines the stress Lee places on the aesthetics of form. In the essay, 'Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural in Art', Lee acknowledges the paradoxical nature of this conflict. She writes:

The supernatural, in the shape of religious mythology, had art bound in its service in Antiquity and the Middle Ages; ... From the gods of the *Iliad* down to the Commander in *Don Giovanni*, from the sylvan divinities of Praxiteles to the fairies of Shakespeare, ... the supernatural and the artistic have constantly been linked together. Yet, in reality, the hostility between the supernatural and the artistic is well-nigh as great as the hostility between the supernatural and the logical. Critical reason is a solvent, it reduces the phantoms of the imagination to their most prosaic elements; artistic power, on the other hand, moulds and solidifies them into distinct and palpable forms: the synthetic definiteness of art is as sceptical as the analytical definiteness of logic. For the supernatural is necessarily essentially vague, and art is necessarily essentially distinct: give shape to the vague and it ceases to exist.<sup>185</sup>

This pagan supernatural is particularly problematic for it finds its expression in the sculptural art form. However, Lee finds an uneasy resolution in the 'ghostly', the only supernatural form which truly captures the pagan, for it is 'the only thing which can in any respect replace for us the divinities of old, and enable us to understand, if only for a minute, the imaginative power which they possessed, and of which they were despoiled

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<sup>184</sup> Martha Vicinus, 'The Adolescent Boy: Fin-de Siècle Femme Fatale?', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 5 (1994), 90-114, (p. 101). For Vernon Lee we might also add the eighteenth century which plays an important part (via music and the castrato voice) in her own literary imagination.

<sup>185</sup> Lee, 'Faustus and Helena', in *Belcaro*, pp. 70-105, (pp. 74-75).



not only by logic, but by art'.<sup>186</sup> However, this supernatural form is specifically internalized for, as Lee points out:

By *ghost* we do not mean the vulgar apparition which is seen or heard in told or written tales; we mean the ghost which slowly rises up in our mind, the haunter not of corridors and staircases, but of our fancies ... a vague feeling we can scarcely describe, a something pleasing and terrible which invades our whole consciousness, and which, confusedly embodied, we half dread to see behind us, we know not in what shape, if we look round.<sup>187</sup>

This internalized supernatural is intrinsically linked to childhood. Lee writes that, in the world of the supernatural we seek, 'a renewal of the delightful semi-obscurity of vision and keenness of fancy of our childhood'.<sup>188</sup> Art, according to Lee, provides no substitute for, 'no picture, no symphony, no poem, can give us that delight, that delusory, imaginative pleasure which we received as children from a tawdry engraving or a hideous doll; for around that doll there was an atmosphere of glory'.<sup>189</sup> And in her supernatural tales, these 'ghosts', these 'dolls' return to provide once more the childhood 'freedom' she denies herself in her adult dedication to art.

Yet these 'dolls', as we have seen, are intimately related to art via the sculpture and, in Lee's essay, the focus of our gaze is directed at one particular 'doll' - Helen of Troy - who is for Goethe's Faust, a 'semi-vivified statue', a 'ghostly figure, descended from a pedestal, white and marble-like in her unruffled drapery': a figure for whom Goethe's Faust feels:

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<sup>186</sup> Lee, 'Faustus and Helena', p. 93.

<sup>187</sup> Lee, 'Faustus and Helena', p. 95.

<sup>188</sup> Lee, 'Faustus and Helena', p. 96.

<sup>189</sup> Lee, 'Faustus and Helena', p. 96.

as Goethe himself might have felt, as Winckelmann felt for a lost antique statue, as Schiller felt for the dead Olympus: a passion intensely imaginative and poetic, born of deep appreciation of antiquity, the essentially modern, passionate, nostalgic craving for the past.<sup>190</sup>

Although this ‘intensely imaginative’ passion, and ‘nostalgic craving for the past’ is attributed to Goethe, Schiller, and Winckelmann, one might argue that they are equally evident in Lee’s own responses to sculpture in her supernatural tales. And, like Marsyas and Venus, Helen’s identity is mercurial. Her form is moulded by ‘The Mothers’, ‘blind goddesses’ who, like the chthonian Medusa and her sister gorgons, ‘occupy an eerie netherworld beyond space and time’: a Dionysian dimension of occult transmutation.<sup>191</sup> For Camille Paglia, ‘The Mothers are Greek Fates combined with Plato’s eternal forms’ they are ‘Formation, Transformation, / Eternal Mind’s eternal recreation’.<sup>192</sup> Their realm is that of ‘repressed pagan nature,’ they represent, ‘nature’s brute force of metamorphosis’.<sup>193</sup> It is perhaps fitting, then, that the mythical Helen herself is metamorphic in nature for ‘Helen[a] and Helle, or Selene’ are variations of ‘the Moon-goddess’, and she is therefore inextricably associated with the fluctuating contours of the lunar body.<sup>194</sup> Moreover, Helen is intimately related to the androgynous Aphrodite, for like Helen, Aphrodite is a Moon-goddess, and Helen, like Aphrodite, has her masculine incarnations, most particularly in ‘Hellen - a masculine form of the Moon-goddess Helle or Helen’ worshipped by the Achaeans and the Dorians, and adopted by the Victorian

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<sup>190</sup> Lee, ‘Faustus and Helena’, pp. 100-05.

<sup>191</sup> Paglia, p. 256.

<sup>192</sup> Paglia, p.256; Goethe, *Faust*, Pt. 2, quoted in Paglia, p. 256.

<sup>193</sup> Paglia, p. 256.

<sup>194</sup> Graves, p. 207.



Hellenists.<sup>195</sup> Helen, an ideal of statuesque beauty, projects that sexual ambivalence which forms an essential feature of Winckelmann's sculptural ideal, and which also informs the figures of Marsyas and Venus in Lee's tales. Although, in her essay, Lee argues that Goethe's Helen fails as a supernatural entity, it would appear that her metamorphic body and sexual ambiguity are linked to Lee's definition of a 'ghost'. She embodies both the 'pleasing' quality of beauty, and simultaneously, recalls The Mothers' 'terrible' dark womb-like space, in which her shape is moulded and remolded: her ambivalent gender suggestive of the amorphousness of the primordial child, in a space which can be both reassuring and dangerous. Furthermore, her lunar changeability implies a 'shapelessness', creating that 'semi-obscurity of vision' in her beholder, which Lee sees as an intrinsic part of that internalized childhood experience of the supernatural.

Given the fluidity that characterizes Lee's definition of the supernatural, her ideal Helen arguably finds herself depicted in Gustave Moreau's painting, *Helen at the Scaean Gate* (c.1880), whose androgynous figure, wrapped in concealing draperies, displays a 'blank mannequin's face' reminiscent of the 'blank, white glance' of Lee's Vatican statues, and, like them, she is an 'idol of pagan nature'.<sup>196</sup> Whilst Lee does not mention Moreau's painting in her work, it seems significant that this 'faceless' image appears in similarly androgynous guise in her short story, 'The Featureless Wisdom'.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Graves, p. 161.

<sup>196</sup> Paglia, p. 500.

<sup>197</sup> Vernon Lee, 'The Featureless Wisdom' in *Pope Jacynth and Other Fantastic Tales* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1904), pp. 195-200. Here, I use the second edition published by John Lane, (1907). Subsequent references appear in the text.

### **‘The Featureless Wisdom’**

Here, Lee tells the story of how Diotima, a ‘Priestess of Mantinea’ comes ‘to possess an effigy of Athena, conspicuous by the absence of all features’ (195). We are told that Diotima, an acquaintance of, among others, such ‘remarkable persons’ as Socrates and Alcibiades, whose conversation had dispelled all vain prejudices’ from her soul, had decided that ‘the only Wisdom to which she could possibly bring worship and service would have to be a Wisdom entirely and exclusively her own’ (195). This being so, she asks the sculptor Pheidias ‘to make her an image of Athena of a size to fit into her hat-box, and with a set of features easily distinguishable from those of the idols handed down by the past and still adored by the common herd’ (196). Pheidias obliges and at the end of eight days Diotima calls to collect the sculpture. Whilst admiring its form, she is less happy with its features in which she sees too great a likeness to ‘the *type of the infernal goddesses*’ (196). Pheidias agrees to alter the sculpture, but the result is, yet again, not to Diotima’s taste, for its head looks ‘just a little bit too like that of an Aphrodite’ a figure rejected on account of its unsuitable associations (197). The figure is once again altered, but on her third visit, Diotima is dismayed to discover that one of Pheidias’ pupils had fitted onto the image of Athena, ‘a very neat and expressive little head of Silenus’ (197). At the end of another fortnight, Diotima returns to Pheidias’ workshop to collect the Athena. When it is handed to her, she stares at it in silence:

For the effigy of the goddess ... had indeed a most becoming helmet with three chimaeras tastefully curled round the ostrich feathers; it had even a face, with



finely-modelled chin and delicate flat ear. But it had no features. No eyes, no nose, no mouth - nothing! (198).

Believing Pheidias to be playing a joke on her, Diotima is about to leave when Pheidias explains his reasons for his featureless sculpture:

You have asked for an impossibility - what your clever friends call a *metaphysical* miracle, I believe; and I have vainly endeavoured to satisfy you by a series of makeshifts which, I am bound to say, most ladies would not have detected. So there remains nothing for it but to impart to you a remarkable mystery which your ingenious mind ... will doubtless take much pleasure in expounding. To wit: That by a supreme and inscrutable decree, the features of Wisdom must always remain the same as we see them in the great images that are set up ... in public places ... And any image differing essentially from these must, therefore, be that of some inferior divinity, ill-famed, or ill-favoured, or ill-omened; or else, like this one, a poor little sightless and speechless doll, very suitable as a plaything for persons of refinement (199-200).

The passage seems worth quoting in full because it arguably highlights the problematic role of the intelligent woman in male society. If we return to Max Beerbohm's comments on the fly-leaf of his copy of Lee's *Gospels of Anarchy*, quoted in the previous chapter, we find the image of Vernon Lee as a diminutive woman in constant debate with the writers and philosophers of her time. It is but a short imaginative leap to connect this image of Lee both with the figure of Diotima who appears in debate with Socrates in the *Symposium* and with, significantly, the 'sightless' and 'speechless' doll which arguably represents woman's powerless position in Victorian society. In Lee's tale, Diotima's wise words are credited to Socrates himself for Pheidias, 'had heard his friend Socrates speak of Diotima, and had even suspected that, as may happen between ladies and

philosophers, the wise man had attributed some of his own remarks to the Priestess of Mantinea' (196). It would appear that Diotima's position of power is maintained at the cost of serving as a 'doll' through which the male voice of philosophy can be ventriloquized. It is unsurprising, then, to find that she, arguably like Lee, locates her counterpart in Athena, the goddess of wisdom, that figure which, for Charles Segal, represents the 'incorporation of the otherness of female creative energy into the polis'.<sup>198</sup> But, despite its appropriation by patriarchy, Athena's power is still formidable, and it seems significant that Kit Anstruther-Thomson's description of Pheidias' Athene Parthenos (fig. 10) in *Art and Man: Essays and Fragments* (1924), (a collection of her aesthetic responses edited and introduced by Vernon Lee), resonates interestingly with characteristics that define Lee herself; her social alienation, her awesome intellectuality, and the contradictions and sexual tensions that inhabit her oeuvre. For Anstruther-Thomson the Athene is 'in no sort of communication with mortals and has made no attempts to get nearer mortal size'.<sup>199</sup> She appears before men 'not as a gigantic human figure, but as a vast supernatural presence ... [who] must have struck awe into her worshippers'.<sup>200</sup> The goddess's intellectuality is appropriately located in the phallic structure of the sculpture's 'towering helmet', its winged horses representative of the 'wise and wonderful ideas, the thoughts that were blazing in the brain of the goddess', whose outward rush is 'checked and held back' by the hybrid figure 'under the helmet's central crest, the sphinx'.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Segal, p. 31.

<sup>199</sup> Anstruther-Thomson, p. 345.

<sup>200</sup> Anstruther-Thomson, p. 345.

<sup>201</sup> Anstruther-Thomson, pp. 345-47.





Fig. 10 Phidias, *Athene Parthenos*, National Museum, Athens.



Yet the figure of Athena is itself complicated by her own ambiguous sexuality. Her 'sexual hybridism' is made evident in Homer, 'who makes her descents a sexual masquerade'.<sup>202</sup> In the *Iliad*, she 'appears on earth four times as a male, once as a vulture, and six times in her own form. In the *Odyssey*, she appears eight times as a male, twice as a human girl, six times as herself'.<sup>203</sup> For Jane Harrison, Athena is a patriarchal symbol responsible for turning 'the local Kore of Athens' into 'a sexless thing, neither man nor woman', she is 'manufactured' and seemingly 'unreal': language which connects Athena not only with the Dionysian figures we have traced in Lee's supernatural tales, but also with the 'unreality' of Lee's ghosts, those vague evanescent figures that inhabit her interiority.<sup>204</sup> It seems significant, then, that in 'The Featureless Wisdom', a 'fantastic' tale that hovers on the uncertain borders of the real and the unreal, Lee rejects the explicitly Dionysian figures represented by the 'infernal goddesses', the 'Aphrodite' and the 'Silenus' sculpted in Pheidias workshop, and settles instead for the faceless doll, a sexless and featureless figure: a 'transitional object' that allows the projection of a fluid and indeterminate, but nevertheless powerful, identity. And, like the Athene Parthenos, who we come to know only 'through the faint echoes of her which remain (poor little statuettes scattered about in most of the great museums)', Lee's featureless Wisdom contains her own mysteries.<sup>205</sup> Her sphinx-like inscrutability harbours perhaps those secrets implicit in Lee's supernatural tales. She holds back the goddess's thoughts:

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<sup>202</sup> Paglia, p. 84.

<sup>203</sup> Paglia, p. 84.

<sup>204</sup> Quoted in Paglia, p. 84.

<sup>205</sup> Anstruther-Thomson, p. 345.



Many of them she will hold back for centuries, perhaps, till the world is ready for them, but also many, I think, she will keep back altogether, knowing them to be too incandescent for mortal minds to use'.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Anstruther-Thomson, p. 347.

**3**

**All So Much Toy-Shop Stuff**



*An old-fashioned doll, that is not like nature,  
Can never pass for a human creature;  
It is in a doll that moves her eyes  
That the danger of these misfortunes lies!*

William Brighty Rands (1899)<sup>1</sup>

In the last chapter, I looked at the statue's role as 'transitional object' in Lee's negotiation of identity, highlighting the metamorphic properties that underlie the seeming rigidity of the sculptural medium, which culminated in the intriguing 'facelessness' of Lee's Athenian doll in 'The Featureless Wisdom'. In this chapter the figure of the doll is examined more closely. After looking briefly at its symbolic value in Lee's contemporary culture, I aim to link the doll to its sculptural counterpart and to show that Lee's own ambivalent response to the doll in her supernatural fiction can be attributed to the part it plays in her exploration of alternative subjectivities. I claim that, like the voice-object, and the statue, the doll functions as a 'transitional object' which, as we shall see, allows that fluidity of identity we have already witnessed elsewhere in the 'potential space' of Lee's fantastic tales.

The 'sightless and speechless doll' which appears in 'The Featureless Wisdom' manifested itself earlier in a different context in Lee's article, the 'Economic Dependence of Women' in the *North American* in 1902. Here the doll figures as an analogue for the powerless Victorian woman, subject to male power and control. Living in a patriarchal society where she is handed from father to husband, the latter functions, according to Lee, as a commodity 'amalgamated with the man's property', a possession, 'a piece of

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Love Story', in *The Victorians: An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Valentine Cunningham (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), ll. 41-44, pp.566-67, (p. 567).

property herself, body and soul'.<sup>2</sup> Lee observes that by this process:

the man and the woman ... do not stand opposite one another ... but in a quite asymmetrical relation: a big man, as in certain archaic statues, holding in his hand a little woman; a god ... protecting a human creature; or ... a human being playing with a doll.<sup>3</sup>

This is a position which Lee sees as unacceptable and undesirable, and it is a position which, I claim, is implicitly questioned by this doll's sculptural counterpart, Diotima's 'doll' in *The Featureless Wisdom*, who defies categorization. However, as in her tale, the 'doll-woman' in Lee's article is a masculine construction for, as she points out, 'women ... have been as much a creation of men as the grafted fruit tree, the milch cow, or the gelding'.<sup>4</sup> The doll-woman, then, fulfils the functions required of her by Victorian society. Grafted onto her man, she can, in her married state, use his 'sap' to produce suitable 'fruit' in the form of children, as a result of which she metamorphoses into a 'milch cow', and in her unmarried state is destined to the position of 'gelding', effectively occupying the indeterminate gender of the castrato.<sup>5</sup> However, this 'doll' also functions as a symbol

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<sup>2</sup> Lee, 'The Economic Parasitism of Women', in *Gospels of Anarchy and Other Contemporary Studies*, (London: Fisher Unwin, 1908), pp. 263-97, (p. 270). This article first appeared as the introduction to *La donna et l'economia sociale*, trans. by Carolina Pironti (Florence: G. Barbèra, 1902), the Italian version of Charlotte Perkins Stetson's *Women and Economics* (1898), and was published in English as the 'Economic Dependence of Women' *North American*, 175, July (1902), 71-90, before being repeated in Lee's *Gospels of Anarchy* (1908), as 'The Economic Parasitism of Women'. Stetson, (better known as Gilman), was to correspond with Lee - letters are in the Lee archive at Somerville College, Oxford - expressing her admiration for the latter, and a number of annotated copies of Stetson's subsequent publications are to be found in Vernon Lee's library collection at the British Institute in Florence.

<sup>3</sup> Lee, 'The Economic Parasitism of Women', p. 270.

<sup>4</sup> Lee, 'The Economic Parasitism of Women', p. 294.

<sup>5</sup> As Elaine Showalter notes, the single woman or 'odd' woman - a word which suggests both 'superfluous' and 'peculiar' - was subjected to a popular identity that encompassed 'elements of the lesbian, the angular spinster, and the hysterical feminist,' often symbolized by the 'mannish woman orator' who, as we have seen, has her own associations with the castrato. See Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, 1991), p. 23.



of desirable Victorian femininity which was required to be 'decorative, passive, and sexually pure'.<sup>6</sup> What could be more passive than an 'inanimate' object? and what more sexually pure than 'the seamless body of the doll' in whose 'idealized miniaturisation' the danger of female sexuality and power is lost?<sup>7</sup> Silent and still, woman becomes an object and, as Susan Gubar argues, 'not simply an object ... [but] in terms of the production of culture ... an art object: she is the ivory carving or mud replica, an icon or doll'.<sup>8</sup>

### Seamless Dolls and Stainless Statues

The doll's 'seamless' purity resonates interestingly with the pristine, asexual beauty of Greek sculpture, a purity which, according to Walter Pater, is associated with 'white light' from which 'the angry, bloodlike stains of action and passion' have been purged.<sup>9</sup> This 'white light' is that 'of eternal forms, abstracted from finite bodily particulars, such as sexuality'.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, this 'white light' is intrinsically linked to the Apollonian ideal that, for Lee, represents the epitome of Greek sculpture; for what John Addington Symonds calls the 'clear light of antique beauty' finds its model in the god Apollo who embodies 'the magic of the sun [and whose] soul is light'.<sup>11</sup> Given that for Lee, the 'highest intrinsic quality of form is beauty', this white light and the perfection of form

<sup>6</sup> Mary S. Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses* (London: Robson, 1977), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 124.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Gubar, '“The Blank Page” and the Issues of Female Creativity', in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1986), pp. 292-313, (p. 293).

<sup>9</sup> Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 137.

<sup>10</sup> Eileen Gregory, *H.D. and Hellenism: Classic Lines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> John Addington Symonds, *Studies of the Greek Poets*, 2 vols (London: Black, 1902), II, pp. 364, 367.

seem inextricable.<sup>12</sup> For Symonds, it is not only Apollo that is represented by light. He writes that a harmonic beauty infiltrates all aspects of Greek culture producing in religion, ‘a race of gods, each perfect in his individuality, distinct and self-contained, but blending, like the colours of the prism, in the white light of Zeus, who was the whole’.<sup>13</sup> Here, again, this ‘white light’ creates an encompassing, and protective halo, containing, and providing form and order. Interestingly, in a footnote to this assertion Symonds notes that:

The Greek Pantheon, regarded from one point of view, represents an exhaustive psychological analysis. Nothing in human nature is omitted: but each function and each quantity of man is deified. To Zeus as the supreme reason all is subordinated.<sup>14</sup>

The gods, then, in their various prismatic hues, constitute those psychological aspects of human nature that are controlled under the aegis of reason. The significance of this for Lee, whose affinity with Zeus’s daughter, Athena, has been traced in the preceding chapters, is clear. Athena, that ‘beam of hard white light’, known for her ‘dangerous luminosity’ and ‘terrifying purity’, seems to have inherited, and to share in the ‘white light’ of Zeus’s purifying presence.<sup>15</sup> The ‘white light’ shedding its rays from the perfection of sculptural form would appear to obscure those human frailties and unruly desires which are implicit in the statue and its associations. Yet, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the colour white is often appropriated by the homoerotic gaze to

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<sup>12</sup> Lee, ‘The Child in the Vatican’, p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> Symonds, *Poets*, p. 378.

<sup>14</sup> Symonds, *Poets*, p. 378.

<sup>15</sup> Paglia., p. 81.



express its desire and this transgressive eroticism, present in the very whiteness of the sculptural form, is evident in the works of Winckelmann, Pater, Lee, and H.D. It manifests itself particularly when that whiteness is compromised by a play of light that dapples the sculptural figure, a phenomenon which, captured in the Greek term *poikilos*, serves to encode homoerotic love: the transient movement of shadow and light threatening to expose the 'lurid colour' of those desires. Indeed, Eileen Gregory has recently pointed out that colour, with its homoerotic connotations, functions, for H.D., as an anxiety that must be resolved. Gregory argues that in her 1920 essay on Sappho, H.D. felt compelled to 'apologize for her own poetic and erotic dispositions', treating Sappho 'as much as possible in the acceptable terms of a Dorian aesthetic'.<sup>16</sup> What is particularly interesting is the need to 'purify' colour in order to achieve this. Gregory writes:

'True,' H.D. says, 'there is a tint of rich colour ... violets, purple woof of cloth, scarlet garments, dyed fastening of a sandal, the lurid, crushed and perished hyacinth, stains on cloth and flesh and parchment' ... The operative rhetorical construction here - 'True ... but' - is necessary because the *tinted*, *dyed*, *lurid*, and *stained* belong to a prurient iconography of Sappho, exemplified in Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, in Baudelaire's and Swinburne's 'lesbian,' and in Pierre Louys's *Chansons de Bilitis*. But H.D. redeems Sappho's color-taint, the deep 'stains ... on the red and scarlet cushions' ... by indicating that the words of Sappho are themselves 'states' of color, 'transcending colour yet containing ... all colour'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Gregory, pp. 105-06.

<sup>17</sup> Gregory, p. 106. Interestingly, Vernon Lee's early Sapphic desire for Clementina Anstruther-Thomson appears to be defined by those purple and scarlet tints which colour H. D.'s descriptions of Sappho. In her introduction to *Art and Man*, Lee writes, 'Kit came to stay with us in Florence after leaving Paris at Easter, 1888. The precise date has been fixed in my mind less by the importance it later showed as having in my life than, oddly enough, by the recollection, as vivid as their own colours, of putting scarlet and purple anemones in her room' (p. 16).

Sappho's words, then, glow, and are safely 'purified' in the prismatic 'white light' of Dorian aestheticism, the 'traditional color iconography of white marble'.<sup>18</sup>

In his analysis of Lee and her works, Burdett Gardner argues that ' "Whiteness," ... is the common denominator of all her symbols of purity'.<sup>19</sup> Lee herself was to describe 'white' as 'the queen ... of all colours' and to argue that 'Our minds, our very sensations are so intricately interwoven of impressions ... of all kinds, that it is no allegory to say that white is good, and that the love of whiteness is somehow akin to the love of virtue'.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, green suggests 'pollution, fertility and sex', and red harbours 'lurid and sinister' connotations linked variously with reality, sacrifice and, on one occasion, with menstruation.<sup>21</sup> In Lee's fictional biography of the artist Domenico Neroni which appears in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1896), Neroni seemingly acts as a mouthpiece for her own sentiments about colour: ' "Colour" writes Domenico Neroni "is the enemy of noble art. It is the enemy of all precise and perfect form, since where colour exists form can be

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<sup>18</sup> Gregory, p. 106.

<sup>19</sup> Gardner, p. 405.

<sup>20</sup> Lee, 'In Praise of White', entry dated July 27th from Fladbury Rectory, in *Commonplace Books*, n.s., 4, (Dec. 1888-Dec. 1890), Special Collections, Colby College Library, Waterville, Maine, p. 54.

<sup>21</sup> Gardner, pp. 349, 405. Quoting a passage from a collection of essays entitled *The Sentimental Traveller* (1908), Gardner alludes to Lee's description of sea shells out of which 'oozed or quivered ... fleshy things, red and sleek like hidden organs, entrails which never see the light and should never be seen' (quoted in Gardner, p. 409). Gardner writes, 'By the time that Miss Paget experienced the normal changes of puberty, she had pathologically rejected the fact of her femininity. From this circumstance one may suspect that she underwent in childhood a revulsion - almost traumatic in its vehemence - to the appearance of blood' (pp. 407-408). Given Gardner's focus on Lee's latent lesbianism, it is strange that he chooses to ignore the obvious sexual implications of those 'fleshy', 'red' and 'sleek', 'hidden organs'. Interestingly, in the aforementioned commonplace book entry, 'In Praise of White', Lee is disgusted by the red colour of a fellow guest's 'Baudelairian nightgown [my emphasis]'. Lee writes: 'I am [annoyed] by the [colour] of this woman's crimson silk nightdress. I venture to assert that apart from all allegory - [Holopherace] might have worn such, or Messalina when the cloud came up from Ostia - this grotesque circumstance has a higher significance. To put red silk next to one's nakedness, to seek for it in rest - not the mere physical rest, but the kind of spiritual cleansing, the [passing] through the cool, the colourless, the stainless which constitutes healthy sleep - this surely is a sign of a strange crookedness of mind, of an absence or perversion of sensation [and] fancy, such; I maintain, as is scarcely compatible with wholesome living or with a wholesome conception of life' (p. 54).



seen only as juxtaposition of colour” ’.<sup>22</sup> That the ancient Romans and Greeks portrayed their gods in ‘white marble ... and not gaudy porphyry or jasper’, reinforces for Neroni the superiority of colourlessness in the representation of form.<sup>23</sup> Given Gardner’s key to Lee’s colour psychology, Neroni’s rejection of red and green represented by porphyry and jasper seems significant. For Lee, the inclusion of colour apparently suggests an excess which disrupts form and order. Yet, Greek statues *were* originally painted. Stone figures were ‘completed by the application of colour, the predominant colours being a bright red and a merry blue’, while in limestone figures, ‘male flesh was painted red or red-brown, and blue and red, [and] occasionally other colours [were] used for the garments’.<sup>24</sup> In marble, ‘the colours, though bright, were used more discreetly: the flesh was commonly left plain, with coloured details - hair, lips, eyes; part of the drapery might be coloured, but most of it was plain, with coloured borders or a sprinkling of little patterns’.<sup>25</sup>

### **Stained and Deadly Dolls**

Interestingly, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, certain innovative sculptors had begun to experiment with colour on marble statuary. John Gibson’s *Tinted Venus* (referred to in the previous chapter) was exhibited in 1850, and in 1889 Moreau

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<sup>22</sup> Vernon Lee, ‘A Seeker of Pagan Perfection’, in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (London: Smith & Elder, 1896), pp. 165-231, (p. 170).

<sup>23</sup> Lee, *Renaissance Fancies*, p. 171.

<sup>24</sup> J. D. Beazley and Bernard Ashmole, *Greek Sculpture and Painting to the End of the Hellenistic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> Beazley and Ashmole, p. 15.

Vauthier's bust, *Gallia* (fig. 11), appeared at the Paris International Exhibition.<sup>26</sup>

Influenced by Vauthier, George Frampton sculpted *Mysteriarch* (1892), and his famous later work, *Lamia* (fig. 12), was exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts 1899-1900.<sup>27</sup>

Susan Beattie's descriptions of *Gallia*, *Mysteriarch*, and *Lamia* in her book, *The New Sculpture*, are suggestive and prompt an exploration of the disturbing quality of coloured sculptures. Of *Gallia* Beattie writes:

It is a conventional, even commonplace image of a female warrior that takes on a startling and almost supernatural quality from the materials and the manner in which it is worked. The fleshy face is of ivory, its smoothness and pallor sharply offset by the richly chased and gilded silverwork of the armour. A Medusa head decorates Gallia's breast and a winged beast surmounts her helmet.<sup>28</sup>

Frampton's *Mysteriarch*, also displaying an 'ivory tint and sheen', set against the 'stiff, metallic quality of the bodice', is indicative of Frampton's regard for Vauthier's work.<sup>29</sup>

But it is his *Lamia*, that generates, for my purpose, the most interesting effect. Beattie quotes a contemporary viewer's experience of seeing Frampton's sculpture:

I had been in the sculpture gallery some minutes before my eye fell on this strange and fascinating Lamia. Imagine a life-size face of extraordinary beauty ... that in a minute becomes flesh to the eye, the hair and shoulders covered with a close-fitting head-dress and robe. As you gaze, a faint colour comes to the lips - the loveliest, most sensitive of mouths - the eyelids quiver a very little, and her expression changes, but never loses its mystery or its sadness. She makes an absolute silence in the room; whoever turns his head in passing stops and remains as one enchanted.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Susan Beattie, *The New Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 158.

<sup>27</sup> Beattie, pp. 158, 160.

<sup>28</sup> Beattie, p. 158.

<sup>29</sup> Beattie, p. 158.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Beattie, p. 161.





Fig. 11 Moreau Vauthier, *Gallia*, Paris International Exhibition 1889, present location unknown.

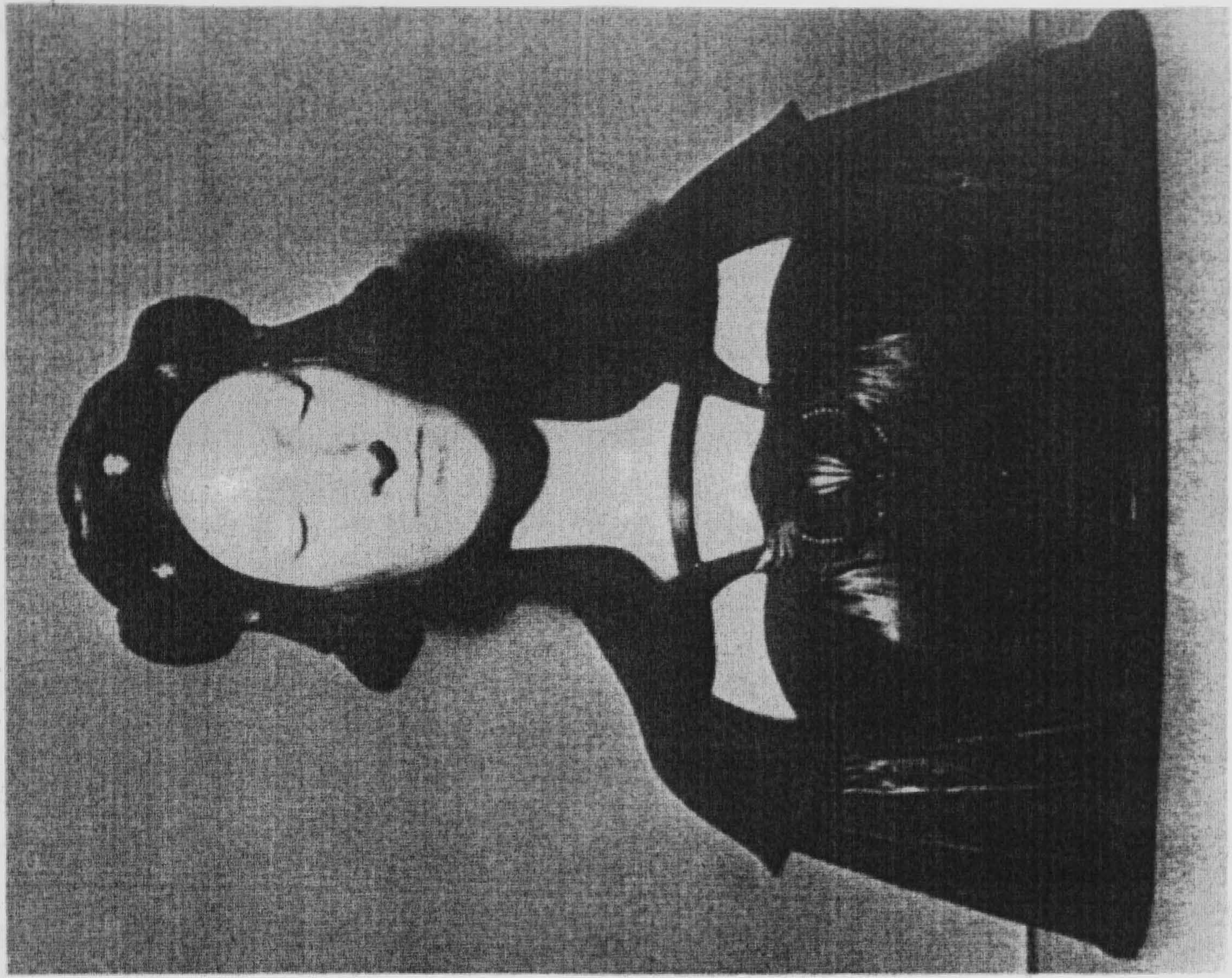


Fig. 12 George Frampton, *Lamia*, Royal Academy of Arts.



As for Pygmalion who runs his hands over his work, ‘to see whether it was flesh or ivory’<sup>31</sup> it is Lamia’s colour that stimulates an erotic response in the viewer. Here, as in the earlier description of *Gallia*, ivory becomes flesh, and, in a fantasy of sexual animation, the sculpture’s lips are stained with a ‘faint colour’. Like the ‘lascivious warmth’ of Gibson’s *Tinted Venus*, which, for Hawthorne, ‘demoralizes the chastity of the marble’, colour eroticizes the ‘purity’ of the sculptural form and I will investigate this phenomenon further in due course.<sup>32</sup> However, for the moment, I wish to explore another effect generated by the coloured sculpture: its ability to fascinate and ‘paralyze’ the viewer.

Beattie argues that Frampton’s *Lamia* shares ‘something of the human condition’ if only ‘by virtue of its existence in three dimensions and its subjection to the same play of light’, and that it is this affinity which allows it the power ‘to convey an almost oppressive sense of stillness, isolation and silence’.<sup>33</sup> Lamia’s capacity to transmit this sense of stillness and isolation to her viewer recalls Rilke’s essay on the wax dolls of Lotte Pritzel (fig. 13). Faced with their ominous silence, Rilke relives his childhood experience of the doll:

At a time when everyone was concerned to give us prompt and reassuring answers, the doll was the first to make us aware of that silence larger than life which later breathed on us again and again out of space whenever we came at any point to the border of our existence. Sitting opposite the doll as it stared at us, we

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<sup>31</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by Mary M. Innes (London: Penguin, 1955), p. 231.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in the editorial notes to *The Marble Faun* (London: Penguin, 1990), ed. by Richard H. Brodhead, n. 1, p. 475.

<sup>33</sup> Beattie, p. 161.





Fig. 13 Lotte Pritzel, decorative dolls, wax and cloth.



experienced for the first time ... that hollowness in our feelings, that heart-pause which could spell death.<sup>34</sup>

Eva-Maria Simms argues that, for Rilke, the disturbing quality of the doll lies in her ‘lifelessness and her indifference and unresponsiveness to the child’s emotions’.<sup>35</sup> Rilke acknowledges a ‘hatred, which unconsciously has always been part of our relationship with her’ and argues that, looked at from the perspective of adulthood she would be seen, ‘finally without disguise: as that gruesome alien body for which we have wasted our purest warmth; as that superficially *painted drowned corpse*, [my emphasis] lifted and carried by the floods of our tenderness until it dried out and we forgot it somewhere in the bushes’.<sup>36</sup> In time we will return to our childhood engagement with the doll but, for now, I would like to keep in mind Rilke’s image of the doll as ‘corpse’. In 1900 the enraptured admirer of Frampton’s *Lamia* wrote of her, ‘I cannot recall anything quite like this’, but I would claim that *Lamia*’s sisters are to be found in the wax anatomical models constructed ostensibly for medical purposes (fig. 14).<sup>37</sup> Ludmilla Jordanova tells us that both male and female bodies were made: male bodies were either ‘upright muscle men, with no flesh

<sup>34</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, ‘Dolls: On the Wax Dolls of Lotte Pritzel’, in *Essays on Dolls: Kleist, Baudelaire, Rilke*, trans. by Idris Parry and Paul Kegan, ed. by Idris Parry, Syrens Series (London: Penguin, 1994), pp. 26-39, (p. 33). Rilke saw Lotte Pritzel’s dolls in a Munich exhibition in 1913. Pritzel’s dolls were not made for children; they are figures made of wire and wax adopting poses which suggest dance movements. The editor tells us that ‘In the 1920s professional dancers impersonated Pritzel dolls on stage’ and that one billed her act as ‘Dances of Vice, Horror, and Ecstasy’, a title later used by the Munich Puppet Theatre Museum when it exhibited Pritzel’s work in 1987. The title suggests an experience of eroticism and abjection that informs our relationship with the figure of the doll.

<sup>35</sup> Eva-Maria Simms, ‘Uncanny Dolls: Images of Death in Rilke and Freud’, *New Literary History*, 27 (1996), 663-77, (p. 670).

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Simms, p. 670.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Beattie, p. 161. These models were manufactured in Northern Italy towards the end of the eighteenth century and, as a result of their popularity, were used all over Europe. One of the largest collections was that in La Specola, (Royal and Imperial Museum of Physics and Natural History), set up between 1766 and 1780 in Florence. See Ludmilla Jordanova, *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science Between the 18th Century and 20th Century*. (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), and Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).



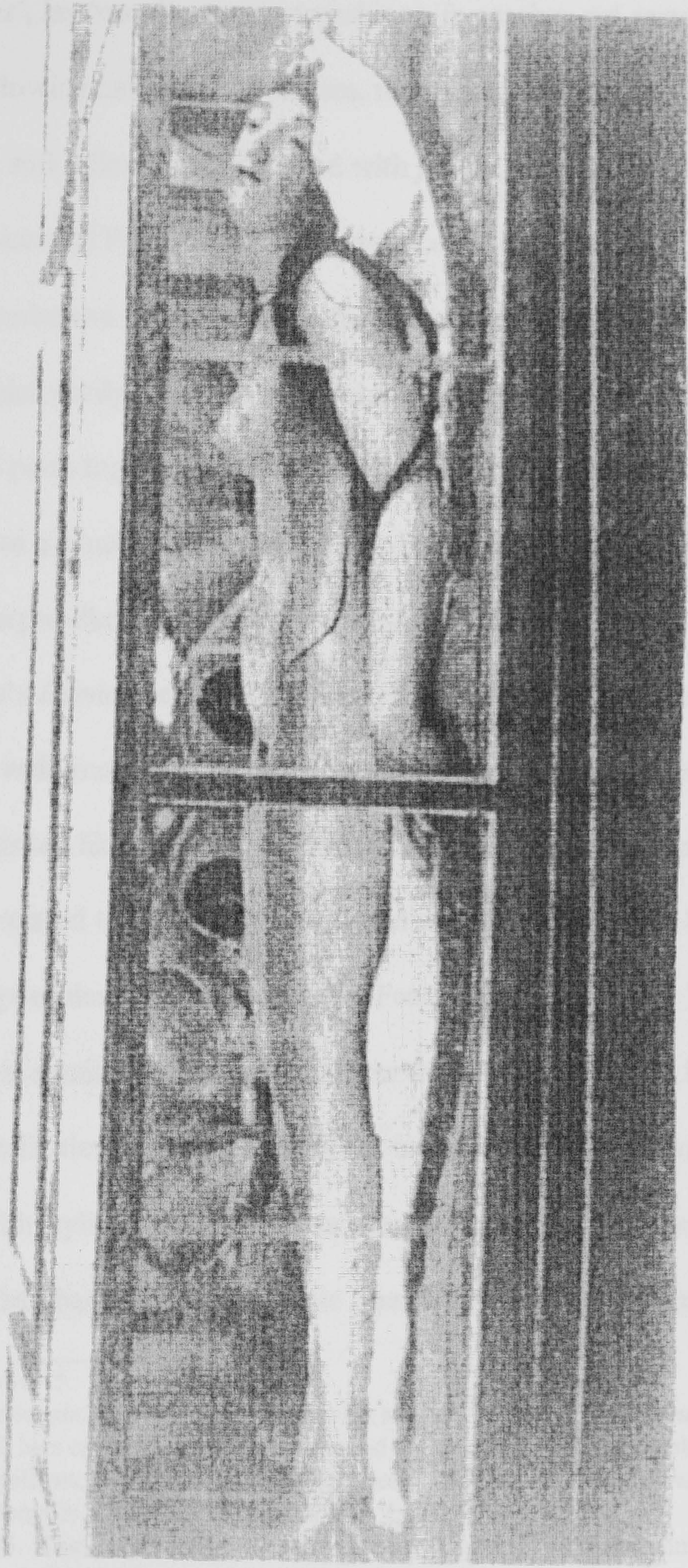


Fig. 14 Anatomical Venus, La Specola, Florence.



at all, or severely truncated male torsos' whereas their female counterparts, interestingly called 'Venuses', lay 'on silk or velvet cushions, in passive, yet sexually inviting poses ... adorned with flowing hair, pearl necklaces, removable parts and small foetuses'.<sup>38</sup>

Recumbent on soft pillows and bedecked with jewels, these latter-day Galateas are, like *Lamia*, reminiscent of Pygmalion's ivory statue eliciting a fantasy of desire and animation.<sup>39</sup> Jordanova points out that 'the use of wax to imitate flesh produces texture, and colour, which eerily resemble "the real thing" , ' and 'the naturalistic colouring of all the anatomical parts together with the meticulous details such as eyelashes and eyebrows further reinforce a simultaneous admiration of and unease about the likeness'.<sup>40</sup> Sexually inviting, yet corpse-like in their stillness, these anatomical dolls are evidently linked to both Frampton's *Lamia* and Rilke's childhood doll. Moreover, repeating 'positions and gestures from well-known works of art', and displayed in 'anatomical museums [which] were visited like the great art museums of the eighteenth century', these models are intimately related to statues, ' "those great dolls" so disliked by Baudelaire' and the sightless and speechless doll, in Lee's 'The Featureless Wisdom'.<sup>41</sup> Yet the difference between them is significant and lies in the use of colour and its role in the creation of an illusory verisimilitude. Writing of responses to the substitution of traditional shop mannequins with stylized and featureless alternatives in the early part of the twentieth century, Tag Gronberg tells us that these 'metallic and gleaming figures were often

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<sup>38</sup> Jordanova, pp. 44-45.

<sup>39</sup> In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Pygmalion adorns his statue's fingers with rings and places 'long necklaces round its neck.' It lays on 'a couch that was covered with cloths of Tyrian purple' and its head reclines upon 'soft down pillows, as if it could appreciate them'. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by Mary M. Innes (London: Penguin, 1955), Bk. X, pp. 225-45, (p. 232).

<sup>40</sup> Jordanova, p. 45. The anatomical perfection of these figures is particularly interesting, and specific attention is given to the sexual parts, extending to the provision of pubic hair.

<sup>41</sup> Jordanova, p. 45; Bronfen, p. 99; Potts, 'Dolls and Things', p. 373.



interpreted as a rejection of the trompe-l'oeil materials (such as wax or hair) used in mannequins of earlier periods' and argues that these 'modern mannequins assuaged the unease provoked by a too-close resemblance of wax figures to the female body'.<sup>42</sup> A quotation from a 1924 arts magazine in which traditional mannequins are referred to as 'horrific wax cadavers' and 'disturbing counterfeits' consolidates Gronberg's assertion.<sup>43</sup> The unease caused by the doll, then, apparently lies in its borderline existence between life and death and in its association with the female body. In his famous essay, 'The "Uncanny",' Freud, (quoting Jentsch), locates our understanding of uncanniness in our 'doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not in fact be animate' ... [an] impression made by waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata'.<sup>44</sup> Taking his lead from Jentsch's reference to the works of Hoffmann as examples of uncanny effects in literature, Freud goes on to analyze Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' (1816), and almost immediately rejects the doll, Olympia, - an obvious example of Jentsch's uncanny - in favour of the sandman himself. Freud's reluctance to engage with the subject of the doll's body, and by implication the body of woman, is well documented and discussed by critics such as Ruth Ginsberg, Samuel Weber, and Hélène Cixous.<sup>45</sup> Ginsberg writes, 'Thematically, figuratively and structurally, women and the feminine play a decisive role in Hoffmann's text. They play

<sup>42</sup> Tag Gronberg, 'Beware Beautiful Women: The 1920s Shopwindow Mannequin and a Physiognomy of Effacement', *Art History*, 20 (1997), 375-396, (p. 379).

<sup>43</sup> Gronberg, p. 379.

<sup>44</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (1917-1919), 24 vols, trans. and ed. by James Strachey, Anna Freud and others (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), XVII, pp. 219-52. (p. 226).

<sup>45</sup> See Ruth Ginsberg, 'A Primal Scene of Reading: Freud and Hoffmann', *Literature and Psychology*, 38 (1992), 24-46, Hélène Cixous, 'Fiction and its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's Das Unheimliche (The "Uncanny")', *New Literary History*, (1976), 534-48, and Samuel Weber, 'The Sideshow, or: Remarks on a Canny Moment', *Modern Language Notes*, 88 (1973), 1102-1133.

none in Freud's; at least not in its surface rhetoric', and Cixous points out that, in Freud's essay, the doll is relegated to a footnote which acts as 'a typographical metaphor of repression which is always too near but nevertheless negligible'.<sup>46</sup> If we agree with Weber's observation that 'Freud came to the conclusion that it was not "repression ... which produces anxiety," but anxiety which produces repression', we are forced to ask what is it about the doll which makes Freud so anxious that he needs to repress it?<sup>47</sup> For Ginsberg and for Weber this repression is prompted by the doll's affinity with the body of the mother. Ginsberg writes, 'Hoffmann's text offers, quite explicitly, another source of the uncanny - Woman. Woman not as lack or castration ... but as "beginning" - origin and as heterogeneous plenitude.'<sup>48</sup> In Weber's assessment, Freud's understanding of anxiety as a symptom of repression is linked to fears of castration for, as he points out, in Freud's 1926 paper, 'Hemmung, Symptom und Angst' ('Inhibition, Symptom and Anxiety'), 'the particular anxiety which now became paradigmatic for the structure of anxiety itself was *castration-anxiety*' under which the notions of separation from the maternal body and object-loss are also subsumed.<sup>49</sup> For Cixous, however, the uncanniness of Hoffmann's doll lies in its liminal existence: 'Olympia is not inanimate. The strange power of death moves in the realm of life as the *Unheimliche* in the *Heimliche*, as the void fills up the lack'.<sup>50</sup> Yet this 'dead' body has its own affinity with the body of woman. If we return to our anatomical Venuses, the association between them becomes clear.

Bronfen writes:

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<sup>46</sup> Ginsberg, p. 25, Cixous, p. 537.

<sup>47</sup> Weber, p. 1110.

<sup>48</sup> Ginsberg, p. 26.

<sup>49</sup> Weber, p. 1111.

<sup>50</sup> Cixous, p. 543.



These wax models were initially created to give medical students access to the human body without having to be present in the anatomical theatre, so repellent because of its horrible putrefaction and its ghastly forms of dismemberment. The wax specimens were modelled directly from cadavers in a technique also used to recreate relics of saints and martyrs. Producing a substitute of the corrupt and putrefied dead body that would mask death, these models are endemic to a general cultural effort to eliminate the impure state of mutability [*sic*] and decay by replacing it with a pure and immutable wax body double.<sup>51</sup>

Interestingly, Bronfen suggests that this artificial 'dead' body 'was meant to afford access to a truth of human existence, in this case the centre and origin of human life as signified by the interior of the feminine body', an access which, as Irigaray points out, carries its own risks for 'the openness of the mother ... the opening onto the mother ... appear to be threats of contagion, contamination, engulfment in illness, madness and death'.<sup>52</sup>

However, according to Bronfen, the particular fascination 'engendered when the wax cast depicts a feminine body has to do with the fact that the two enigmas of western culture, death and female sexuality, are here "contained" [and that] ... their disruptive and indeterminate quality has been put under erasure'.<sup>53</sup> Covering, distancing, and controlling both sexuality and death, these anatomical figures represent 'the mutable, dangerously fluid, destabilized feminine body' in a 'cleansed, purified, [and] immobile form'.<sup>54</sup> But the danger inherent in the fluid and contaminating female body is not so easily erased, and it is evident that it is present even in that apparently innocuous counterpart of the anatomical Venus, the childhood doll that imbues Rilke with a sense of 'hollowness', a word which

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<sup>51</sup> Bronfen, p. 99.

<sup>52</sup> Bronfen, p. 99; Luce Irigaray, 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother', in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. by Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 34-46, (p. 40).

<sup>53</sup> Bronfen, p. 99.

<sup>54</sup> Bronfen, p. 99.

resonates with that castration anxiety which is also, as we shall see, implicit in Freud's rejection of Hoffmann's doll, Olympia, (to whom we will return later).

## Dolls and Mothers

The doll, then, functions symbolically, in cultural terms, as the body of the mother, a role which it also fulfils, in a different context, for object relations theory, in which transitional objects function as 'the first symbols, representations of the mother' that the child employs in the formation of individual identity.<sup>55</sup> In his paper, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena' first published in 1953, D. W. Winnicott summarizes the special qualities required of the relationship between the child and the transitional object which is defined as the infant's first possession that 'belong[s] at once to them and to the outside world'.<sup>56</sup> The infant 'assumes rights over the object', and the object can be 'affectionately cuddled,' 'excitedly loved' and 'mutilated' according to its whim.<sup>57</sup> It 'must never change, unless changed by the infant' and it 'must survive instinctual loving, and also hating and if it be a feature, pure aggression'.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, 'it must seem to the infant to give warmth, or to move, or to have texture, or to do something that seems to show it has vitality or reality of its own'.<sup>59</sup> Winnicott suggests that the object functions as 'a symbol of the union of the baby and the mother', and that the use of an object symbolizes the

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<sup>55</sup> Jay Watson, 'Guys and Dolls: Exploratory Repetition and Maternal Subjectivity in the Fort/Da Game', *American Imago*, 52, 463-503, (p. 483).

<sup>56</sup> Peter L. Rudnytsky, introduction to *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces: Literary Uses of D. W. Winnicott* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. xi-xxii, (p. xii).

<sup>57</sup> D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 5.

<sup>58</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 5.



union of two now separate things, baby and mother, '*at the point in time and space of the initiation of their state of separateness*'.<sup>60</sup> The doll, as transitional object, apparently assists the child's negotiation of its separation from the mother, and its assertion of an individual identity. Interestingly, however, the doll seemingly inhabits the positions of both mother and child and the relationship between child and doll oscillates between the roles of mother and child, - the doll representing the child - and those of child and mother, - the doll representing the mother. Using the Freudian model of the fort/da game, Jay Watson argues that, although Freud does not acknowledge fort/da as 'a doll game', the little boy's play, involving the cotton reel's disappearance and re-emergence from a curtained crib, is:

an exercise in identification with the mother that specifically stages the child's own origin ... [serving] the same purpose that Irigaray attributes to the doll games of little girls. It allows the child to explore the creative potential of mothering by establishing a relationship to reproduction and playing around with his or her beginning.<sup>61</sup>

For Freud, however, 'doll' games are subject to gendered divisions. The boy's fort/da game is seen as an exercise in masculine control; the cotton reel stands for the mother and she is subordinated in 'a ritual of mastery' which 'turns a madonna into a boytoy'.<sup>62</sup> Yet, as Watson points out, 'when Freud observes a little girl playing with dolls, he recognizes exactly what is going on in metapsychological terms. The player identifies with her mother, while the doll symbolizes the child herself', a configuration he 'cannot or will not

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<sup>60</sup> D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>61</sup> Watson, pp. 491-92.

<sup>62</sup> Watson, pp. 469-71.

see in the case of fort/da'.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, because of his own formulation of sexual identity, where 'the experience ... most basic to femininity, [is] the girl's desire to bear her father's child', a desire which entails an already negotiated separation from the mother, Freud finds nothing inherently 'feminine' in the process of playing with dolls, even though girls 'seem particularly drawn to this activity'.<sup>64</sup> Watson points out that, for Freud,

doll play only becomes feminine when the doll begins to signify the wished-for father's baby; until then the game functions in a more gender-neutral manner, as a means of identifying with the mother's power to act upon passive objects.<sup>65</sup>

Ironically, as Watson notes, 'this active emulation of maternal power' comes to be described 'as phallic activity', phallic because, in Freud's view, 'they stage identifications with activity per se rather than with maternal activity specifically'.<sup>66</sup> Freud's understanding of pre-Oedipal doll-games as phallic, and post-Oedipal doll-games as feminine creates a rigidity that is belied by the fluid identification made possible within its experience and I agree with Watson who argues that, what is at stake ... is a very different mode of identification' - one that Hélène Cixous sees as - 'a kind of pilgrimage, a journey into the strange, sacred territory of another self'.<sup>67</sup> It is an identification that permits the transgression of boundaries, 'predicated upon "permeability" of self ... offering access to difference without jeopardising identity, and at the same time enhancing identity without erasing difference'.<sup>68</sup> The doll, as transitional object, 'performs' in a doll-game that creates

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<sup>63</sup> Watson, p. 490.

<sup>64</sup> Watson, p. 490.

<sup>65</sup> Watson, pp. 490-91.

<sup>66</sup> Watson, p. 491.

<sup>67</sup> Watson, p. 493.; quoted in Watson, p. 493.

<sup>68</sup> Watson, p. 493.



a transitional space in which identity and power can be explored: boys can become ‘mothers’ and girls can inhabit the ‘phallic’ power of the maternal body prior to being subjected to the patriarchal law of the father and the rigidity of a fixed sexual identity.

For Winnicott, as we have seen, these transitional objects, ‘belong to the realm of illusion which is at the basis of initiation of experience’.<sup>69</sup> Yet these doll-games can re-emerge in adulthood, disguised in those interests that capture our imagination. According to Winnicott,

This intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality, constitutes the greater part of the infant’s experience and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living and to creative scientific work.<sup>70</sup>

In an early essay, Lee, too, was to acknowledge this relationship between the childhood toy and our adult interest in art. She writes:

We grown-up folks have got our toys: the Venus of Milo, Raphael’s Madonnas, the music of Mozart or of Wagner, the whole poetry of the world, from the Vedic hymns to Austin Dobson; heroes and heroines, great men and beautiful women of the Past and the Present; all so much toy-shop stuff, made on purpose to banish weariness and trouble.<sup>71</sup>

For Lee, as for Winnicott, it would seem that in adulthood the transitional object is ‘relegated to limbo’ its meaning diffused ‘over the whole cultural field’.<sup>72</sup> Significantly,

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<sup>69</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 14.

<sup>70</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 14.

<sup>71</sup> Vernon Lee, ‘Christkindchen’ in *Juvenilia: Being a Second Series of Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions*, 2 vols (London: Fisher Unwin, 1887), II, pp. 179-99, (p. 185).

<sup>72</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 5.

according to Lee's quotation, these 'toys' are to be found in music, in statuary, in painting, and in poetry. In the preceding chapters I have explored the importance of the musical voice-object and the sculptural object in Lee's tales charting their regression and transformation into transitional objects in her supernatural fiction, and in the chapters to come I will examine this process in relation to the portrait and, (to a lesser degree) to the written word in Lee's work. However, given the emergence of the figure of the doll in the last chapter, and the doll's affinity with the 'painted faces' (i.e. portraits) to be discussed in the next, this seems a useful point at which to investigate the significance of the doll in Lee's supernatural fiction. In *The Shape of Fear: Horror and the Fin de Siècle Culture of Decadence* [sic], Susan J. Navarette dedicates a chapter to Lee's story 'The Doll' (1927) in which she writes:

The doll takes pride of place among the effigies, stone idols, marionettes, and puppets littering the lumber room and enchanted garret of Lee's imagination. References to dolls, effigies, puppets abound in her writings and therefore in the studies or commentaries of her work written by her friends and critics. Lee's friend Maurice Baring - the 'Maurice' of *For Maurice* - referred in his memoirs, for example, to the Italian 'effigies, dolls, puppets' between whose world and our own Lee acted as a mediatrix.<sup>73</sup>

But it is not only the doll, puppet, or effigy which recurs in Lee's work. As Mario Praz points out, there is also the recurrence 'in her fantastic tales of the figure of a naked

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<sup>73</sup> Susan J. Navarette, *The Shape of Fear: Horror and the Fin de Siècle Culture of Decadence* [sic], (Kentucky: Kentucky University Press, 1998), p. 157. Navarette usefully lists other short stories and articles by Lee that prominently feature dolls, puppets, and stone effigies, although she fails to include *Marsyas in Flanders*, (discussed in the last chapter), and also the short story, 'A Wedding Chest' which I will discuss shortly, and in which the body of the doll and the religious relic are implicit.



woman, always with demoniacal stigmata'.<sup>74</sup> We will encounter some of these figures in this chapter and the next but, for now, I would like to concentrate on the relationship between these tainted, naked women and the doll. What Praz fails to add to his observation is that these naked women, bearing demoniacal stigmata, are very often also dead. In 'Prince Alberic and the Snake-Lady' (1896), for example, we are left in the final pages with 'the body of a woman, naked, and miserably disfigured with blows and sabre cuts' and in 'A Wedding Chest' (1904), as we shall see, the naked body of Maddalena, wounded and defiled, is returned in death to her lover.<sup>75</sup> Given the analogy made earlier between the statue, the corpse, and the doll, one could argue that the bodies of these dead women, still, silent, and stained with colour, function as 'dolls' in Lee's work. Reading her tales, our perceptions of doll and woman are conflated in a manner reminiscent of Jean Wéber's artist, who works intently on his puppets while a naked and immobile female body lies on the bed beside him: merely another 'doll' amongst dolls.<sup>76</sup> It would seem that this is also the case for Gardner, for whom these dead women are continuations of the motif of the 'semivir idol' discussed in the previous chapter, an idol which manifests itself in 'dolls, images, statues, pictures, puppets and the dead'.<sup>77</sup> The murdered Maddalena, then, according to Gardner, can be added 'to the battered remnant of the Snake Lady in [Lee's] cabinet collection of idols'.<sup>78</sup> While Gardner notes both the doll-

<sup>74</sup> Mario Praz, Review of *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856 -1935* by Peter Gunn, *English Studies* 47, (1966), 310-14, (p. 313).

<sup>75</sup> Vernon Lee, 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' in *Pope Jacynth*, 2nd edn, (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1907), pp. 21-111, (p. 110). This tale was first published in *The Yellow Book* 10, July (1896) and was repeated alongside 'A Wedding Chest' in *Pope Jacynth and Other Fantastic Tales*, initially published by Grant Richards in 1904.

<sup>76</sup> Navarette uses this painting in her chapter on Lee to illustrate the lack of differentiation made between the living Countess and her dead image - embodied in the doll - by those around her in Lee's tale, 'The Doll' (p. 159).

<sup>77</sup> Gardner, p. 316.

<sup>78</sup> Gardner, p. 321.

like quality of the dead female body in Lee's work, and independently observes Lee's colour psychology (outlined earlier), he fails to make any significant connection between the two. He argues that, 'the characteristic colour of the semivir idol ... is a deadly white', a colour which recalls Pater's white sculptural bodies from which those 'angry, bloodlike stains of action and passion' have been removed.<sup>79</sup> Yet Gardner ignores the colours of which many of these idols are composed. Whilst the statue may maintain its whiteness, dolls, puppets, pictures, and evidently Lee's dead women, are either painted, or marked by colour. Moreover, Praz labels these marks on the female body 'stigmata'; a word which, while retaining religious connotations, is also defined as 'a mark of disgrace or discredit' and 'a visible sign or characteristic of a disease'<sup>80</sup> These women, in death, bear those very marks that signify a 'disorder'; an excess that the figure of the doll attempts to contain, one that manifests itself in blood and in painted colours on woman and doll alike. In the latter, as in those statues in Catholic legends that 'sweat, bleed, [or] cry' the painted surface seems to merge imperceptibly with the body beneath in a fantasy of animation, its colours functioning as a form of seepage from the 'white' body beneath: the blank 'canvas' of the unpainted doll, or puppet.<sup>81</sup> But what is the significance of these colours? A clue may lie in what we have seen to be their role in eroticizing the white body of sculpture, and in their function as 'stains': impurities which, for Pater, seem associated with animation and desire.

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<sup>79</sup> Gardner, p. 326; Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 137.

<sup>80</sup> *O.E.D.* 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

<sup>81</sup> Ziolkowski, p. 22.



## Tainted Love

In spite of being aligned initially with contemporary notions of decadence, invoking in her supernatural fiction, ‘a highly finished, arabesqued, “yellow” style that functioned ... as a projection of and correlative to the fevered states of mind that the Decadents sought to cultivate,’ elsewhere Lee was to demonstrate a ‘touch of something like Puritanism’ that made itself felt in her novel, *Miss Brown* (1884), in which she satirizes what she perceives to be the excesses of Pre-Raphaelitism.<sup>82</sup> Henry James’ criticism of the novel is revealing:

The imperfection of the book seems to me to reside ... in a certain ferocity ... you take the aesthetic business too seriously, too tragically, and above all with too great an implication of sexual motives ... you have impregnated all those people too much with the sexual, the basely erotic preoccupation: your hand was over violent, the touch of life is lighter ... perhaps you have been too much in a moral passion!<sup>83</sup>

Even more telling, perhaps, is Lee’s own journal entry on New Year’s Eve, 1884.

Responding to the novel’s unhappy reception, Lee writes initially ‘“I will show fight”, I said yesterday or the day before when it came home to me from the letter of Monkhouse, the talk of Benn, etc., that the anonymous reviewer in the *Spectator* was not alone in accusing me of having written what Monkhouse calls a “nasty” book’.<sup>84</sup> Yet as the entry progresses self-doubt creeps in and she asks of her response,

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<sup>82</sup> Navarette, p. 144; Pater, quoted in Gunn, pp. 111-12; see Vernon Lee, *Miss Brown: A Novel in Three Volumes* (Edinburgh : Blackwood, 1884). All quotations are taken from this edition, and subsequent references will be made in the text.

<sup>83</sup> Quoted in Gunn, pp. 104-05.

<sup>84</sup> Quoted in Gunn, p. 105.

Is it a mere reaction - one of those almost mechanically explicable phases of feeling whose explicableness and momentariness has given me so strange a sense of unreality? Is it one of those mere reactions which makes me, today, hesitate and pause and say, "I don't know what to answer"?<sup>85</sup>

Reappraising the situation she goes on to write:

Yet so it is. It strikes me now, perhaps all those people are right, perhaps the British public is right; perhaps I have no right to argue on the matter, because I may be colour blind about the data. Here I am accused of having, in simplicity of heart, written, with a view to moralise the world, an immoral book ... I say to myself, 'What if these people were right, or at least nearer the truth than I?' ... am I not perhaps mistaking that call of the beast for the call of God; may there not, at the bottom of this seemingly scientific, philanthropic, idealising, decidedly noble-looking nature of mine, lie something base, dangerous, disgraceful that is cozening me? Benn says that I am *obsessed* by the sense of the impurity of the world ... May this be true? May I be indulging a more depraved appetite for the loathesome, while I *fancy* that I am studying disease and probing wounds for the sake of diminishing both? ... If I could assure myself of having 'nasty' tendencies of mind, I would take my measures, just as I would were I colour blind. I should mistrust the tendency to speculate upon some subjects, entirely put them aside, occupy myself with others; in these submit to the guidance of people about whom no doubt could ever be raised.<sup>86</sup> But how find out? how know? At any rate, the result of all this is not 'show fight', but rather ask my own feelings for their passports.<sup>87</sup>

The passage is fascinating both as an exposition of self, and in its use of language. Lee

associates her failure to see the eroticism and sexual implications in *Miss Brown* with

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<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Gunn, p. 105.

<sup>86</sup> One could suggest that Lee did exactly this by concentrating on the subject of psychological aesthetics, for her friend and executrix, Irene Cooper Willis, was to argue that 'absorption in psychological aesthetics must have been some kind of sex sublimation' (Gardner, p. 226). Yet, as Kathy Alexis Psomiades has recently shown, even this subject is characterized by its focus on the stimulated and responsive female body. See Psomiades.

<sup>87</sup> ' "Still Burning from This Strangling Embrace": Vernon Lee on Desire and Aesthetics', in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. by Richard Dellamora (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 21-41.

<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Gunn, pp. 105-06.



colour-blindness, and significantly, in *Miss Brown*, the moral make-up of Anne herself, ‘a lay-figure for Vernon Lee’ clothed ‘with her own emotional, moral and sociological preoccupations and prejudices’ is linked with a refusal to acknowledge or ‘see’ colour:<sup>88</sup>

For all her familiarity with the aesthetic world, in whose apprehension, as Thaddy O'Reilly's Yankee friend had quietly remarked, ‘right or wrong don't exist,’ - for all her habit of reading poems in which every unmentionable shamefulness was used as so much vermilion or pale-green or mysterious grey in a picturesque and suggestive composition, - Anne had retained a constitutional loathing for touching some subjects, which was like the blind instinctive horror of certain animals for brackish water or mud (2 :196-97).<sup>89</sup>

Moreover, Lee's journal entry reveals that this erotic impurity is linked not only with colour, but also with ‘disease’ and with ‘wounds’, a connection which offers a suggestive illumination of the stigmata that stain the dead and naked women, and their association with the painted dolls that inhabit Lee's tales. But before we explore the tales themselves, I would like to look at the nature of the dangerous eroticism that infiltrates Lee's *Miss Brown*.

## **Miss Brown**

The plot of the novel revolves around Anne Brown who is initially a governess in Italy.

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<sup>88</sup> Gunn, pp. 101-02.

<sup>89</sup> Ironically, ‘colour-blindness’ is used in relation to same-sex desire in Havelock Ellis's analysis of sexual inversion in *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1908). Ellis writes, ‘Symonds compared inversion to color-blindness; and such a comparison is reasonable. Just as the ordinary color-blind person is congenitally insensitive to those red-green rays which are precisely the most impressive to the normal eye ... so the invert fails to see emotional values patent to normal persons, transferring those values to emotional associations which, for the rest of the world, are utterly distinct’. See, Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, 8 vols (New York: Random, 1936), II, p. 317.

Visiting the family she serves, the Pre-Raphaelite poet and artist, Walter Hamlin, is struck by Anne's unusual beauty, and offers to educate her, and to be her guardian, until such time as she is ready to consider whether or not she will marry him. Richard Brown, Anne's only male relative and, being a self-made Scottish businessman, the antithesis of Hamlin, fails to dissuade Anne from accepting the latter's offer. When Anne's education is complete, she arrives in England and is set up in a house in Hammersmith where she meets the leading figures of the 'aesthetic' circle that surrounds Hamlin. Exposed to the literary and artistic excesses of this circle, Anne soon makes her disapproval clear; she does not swoon 'over the descriptions of the kisses of cruel, blossom-mouthed women, who sucked out their lovers' hearts, bit their lips, and strewed their apartments with coral-like drops of blood', and argues that 'a woman of her age had no business not to understand the meaning of such things, and understanding them, not to let the poets know that she would not tolerate them' (2: 24-26). Morally disillusioned with Hamlin, Anne begins to take an interest in social reforms encouraged by her cousin, Richard Brown, who is now an affluent radical reformer and a prospective Member of Parliament. Hamlin, rejected, takes refuge in the attentions of his cousin, the half-Russian Sacha Elaguine, a mysterious and fascinating woman with a past, and travels to Paris with her. Anne sees the relationship between Hamlin and Sacha as a means of escape from her obligations. However, when Hamlin returns from Paris, it is evident that he has indulged in opium, hashish, and drink, to drown the knowledge of his immorality. Learning of the full nature of Sacha's moral depravity, Anne resolves to marry Hamlin in order to save him from himself and from Sacha. On the evening the announcement of their engagement is made,



Sacha reveals to Anne that Hamlin has been her lover. Anne tells her that she knows, and despite her disgust, martyrs herself in marriage to Hamlin.

*Miss Brown* has been the subject of critical scrutiny in two recent works. Kathy Alexis Psomiades discusses the novel both in her book, *Beauty's Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism*, and in her essay, '“Still Burning from This Strangling Embrace”: Vernon Lee on Desire and Aesthetics', in the collection *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*. In *Beauty's Body*, Psomiades writes that Hamlin is 'clearly modeled after Dante Gabriel Rossetti', but one could argue that Hamlin is a conflation of Pre-Raphaelite figures and their relationships with their models.<sup>90</sup> Yet it is not the intimacy between Anne and Hamlin that is Psomiades' primary interest. In her analyses of *Miss Brown* it is the subtext of the relationship between Anne and Sacha that provides the most fascinating insight into Lee's unconscious concerns. In the figure of Anne Brown we find yet another version of Gardner's semivir idol. In descriptions of her we find echoes of her sculptural counterparts: her complexion is of 'a uniform opaque pallor, more like certain old marble than ivory'; she is 'no living creature, but some sort of strange statue - cheek and chin and forehead of Parian marble' (I: 24). She exists, like the doll, in a fantasy of erotic animation, for she is to be 'a realised ideal ... a creature of [Hamlin's] own making' (I: 174). Hamlin's life is to be crowned by gradually endowing with vitality, and then wooing, awakening the love of this beautiful Galatea whose soul he

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<sup>90</sup> Kathy Alexis Psomiades, *Beauty's Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 165. It is worth noting that the educational/sexual nature of the relationship between Hamlin and Anne, resonates not only with the relationship between Rossetti and Lizzie Siddall, but also with that of Ford Madox Brown and Emma Matilda Hill, and that of William Holman Hunt and Annie Miller. The latter is particularly suggestive for Walter Hamlin shares Hunt's initials and Annie Miller shares a Christian name with Anne Brown. For further details of Pre-Raphaelite artists' relationships with their models, see Jan Marsh, *The Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* (London: Quartet, 1985).

had moulded, even as Pygmalion had moulded the limbs of the image which he had made to love and to love' (I: 121-22). Yet, Anne bears marks of eroticism in the colours that stain her whiteness: her lips 'scarcely stained a dull red', her hair of 'dull wrought-iron', and her eyes 'of some mysterious greyish-blue, slate-tinted onyx' (I: 24). Like the tinted statues of Gibson, Vauthier, and Frampton, her subtle colour eroticizes her purity, and elicits Hamlin's desire. However, it is not Hamlin, but Sacha, who deepens Anne's colour. In her discussion of the sensual engagements between the bodies of the two women, Psomiades notes the presence of physical changes in Anne at these moments. When Sacha flings her arms about Anne's neck crying, 'I want *you*', and presses her 'hot lips' on her forehead, Anne's response is that of 'a vague undefinable repulsion' (2: 292-93), and later in the novel, Sacha Elaguine's touch is 'like the contact of some clammy thing' (3: 198). Yet, as Psomiades points out,

'some clammy thing' is also Sacha's body and Sacha's sex, the clammy thing makes Anne hot, rather than cold, 'her face still burning from this strangling embrace', the clammy thing is [...] most decidedly NOT the old nauseous story of heterosexual marriage.<sup>91</sup>

In *Beauty's Body*, Psomiades argues that, 'Anne marries Walter Hamlin not because of what she feels for him but because of what she feels for Sacha Elaguine', and what she feels for Sacha Elaguine is 'a panicky, disavowed, very physical desire'.<sup>92</sup> Indeed, as Psomiades goes on to point out, at the moment when Anne proposes to Hamlin, the

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<sup>91</sup> Psomiades, ' "Still Burning form This Strangling Embrace" ', p. 26. The 'clammy thing' that so disturbs Anne Brown is reminiscent of those 'fleshy things, red and sleek like hidden organs' which Lee describes as oozing and quivering out of sea shells in *The Sentimental Traveller* (quoted. in Gardner, p. 409).

<sup>92</sup> Psomiades, *Beauty's Body*, p. 173.



latter's limbs and lips metamorphose into those of Sacha Elaguine:

'You love me, Anne; you love me!' cried Hamlin, louder; and pressing closer to her, he put out his arms and drew her face to his, and kissed her, twice, thrice, a long kiss on the mouth. It seemed to Anne as if she felt again the throttling arms of Sacha Elaguine about her neck, her convulsive kiss on her face, the cloud of her drowsily scented hair, stifling her. She drew back and loosened his grasp with her strong hands (3:208).

According to Psomiades, this lesbian desire gives Anne a 'Swinburnian body' in *Miss Brown*,

the body of the perverse desiring subject, the body of Tannhäuser, but also of Anactoria, embraced by Sacha-Sappho, 'with such violence that Anne felt her lips almost like leeches and her teeth pressing into her cheek'.<sup>93</sup>

Sacha Elaguine's embrace, it seems, has the hypnotic and debilitating quality of a vampire's kiss. Yet, like the vampire's victim, it appears that Anne herself is contaminated by the contact for implicit in the heat felt on her cheeks is the colour of her blood rising to the surface of her skin, and injecting its redness into her lips.<sup>94</sup> Engulfed in

<sup>93</sup> Psomiades, ' "Still Burning from This Strangling Embrace" ', p. 27. This vampiric image of Sacha's lesbian desire recalls Bertrand Russell's reference to Vernon Lee as a 'vampire' and a 'bloodsucker' (mentioned in my first chapter) in her relationships with the young women of her acquaintance. Arguably, Sacha's 'vampirism' de-stabilizes gender boundaries for the 'Vampire Mouth' is one which, according to Christopher Craft, subverts 'the stable and lucid distinctions of gender, [being] ... the mouth of all vampires male and female', (see Craft, 'Kiss Me with those Red Lips', in *Speaking of Gender*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 216-42, (p. 218) ) and those boundaries are blurred still further by the 'androgynous' name 'Sacha' (see Dennis Denisoff, 'The Forest Beyond the Frame: Picturing Women's Desires in Vernon Lee and Virginia Woolf', in *Women and British Aestheticism*, ed. by Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), pp. 251-69, (p. 263) ).

<sup>94</sup> Sacha Elaguine seems to bear a passing similarity to Toche Bulteau, a one-time friend of Lee's about whom she writes to Kit, stating that, 'if she wanted me it was from a sort of passion and habit of beneficent conquest ... You see she has a way of speaking of the other conquered ones as "mes vampyres," and I couldn't allow myself to be put into that category' (see Gardner, p. 288).

Sacha's embrace, Anne not only has a 'Swinburnian' body but also a 'Swinburnian' face: a face that aligns her with Lee's Zaffirino and those 'wicked, vindictive women' that haunt Magnus's boyhood dreams, as well as with the 'blossom-mouthed women' of Pre-Raphaelite excess.<sup>95</sup> The penalty one pays for being bitten by a vampire is, as we all know, becoming a vampire oneself. It would seem that the coalescence of Hamlin and Sacha extends to Anne herself and, interestingly, the identities of Anne and Hamlin merge into one another and, more significantly, into that of Lee in Mabel Robinson's comments on *Miss Brown* in a letter of December 14th 1885:

Miss Brown never to my eyes has that Etheopian [*sic*] type you so much admire but in all her sudden impulses and tricks of expression reminds me of a certain animal (not without piquancy and charm) familiarly known as the 'little vermin flea.' Mary tells me that Hamlin is the true portrait of that said flea as seen by itself but if that be so I should advise that lively animal to buy a new mirror and if it be a true one it will see a much more noble looking personage.<sup>96</sup>

The amusing nickname, 'little vermin flea' belongs, as Gardner observes, to Vernon Lee, and it is interesting that, to Mary Robinson, Lee has confessed to identifying herself with Walter Hamlin.<sup>97</sup> In view of the self-searching journal entry quoted earlier, this is perhaps

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<sup>95</sup> Interestingly, the androgynous character of Pre-Raphaelite women has been noted by critics such as Carol Christ and David G. Riede. Christ observes that Rossetti 'at once exaggerates all the signs of female sexuality ... while he distorts the female body so that it becomes phallic, in the elongated and muscular neck, the enlarged hands ... and the massive shoulders'. See, Carol Christ, 'Painting the Dead: Portraiture and Necrophilia in Victorian Art and Poetry', in *Death and Representation*, ed. by Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 133-51, (p. 145). Also, see David G. Riede, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Vision*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), esp. Ch. 10.

<sup>96</sup> Quoted in Gardner, pp. 366-67.

<sup>97</sup> Gardner, p. 367. Lee's relationship with Mary Robinson was an intense 'romantic friendship', which, though almost certainly unconsummated in the physical sense, was evidently strong enough to trigger 'a nervous and physical collapse' when Mary announced her engagement to James Darmsteter in 1887 (Gunn p. 98). It is also worth noting that 'little vermin flea', the nickname accorded Lee, is also associated with vampirism for the flea feeds on the blood of its parasitic host.



less remarkable that it would otherwise seem. However, this identification has fascinating implications. In aligning herself with Hamlin, Lee indirectly identifies with Sacha and lesbian desire, a desire that is also doubled by identification with Anne Brown. It seems significant that Anne is ‘Miss *Brown*’ and not ‘Miss *White*’ for, implicit in the colour brown are those untouchable subjects, symbolized by that ‘brackish water or mud’, from which Anne recoils with ‘blind instinctive horror’ (2: 196-97).

The language of colour underlies far more recent, and overt discussions of same-sex friendships and lesbian sexuality in Lee’s period. In her book, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930*, Sheila Jeffreys writes that ‘Krafft-Ebing cited a hereditary *taint* [my emphasis]’ as the cause of homosexuality, and that the use of this ‘defence’ in novels such as Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) ‘was the result of the sexologists’ work in *stigmatising* [my emphasis] and isolating the lesbian in the first place’.<sup>98</sup> Jeffreys frequently refers to this ‘stigmatisation’ of lesbianism, a word which stems from ‘stigma’ and is necessarily associated with both stain and disease. Given these associations, and the rejection of colour and disease implicit in *Miss Brown*, it is particularly fascinating that these associations reappear and recur in Lee’s fantastic tales. Moreover, these tales, as we have seen, provide a fantasy space in which Lee explores alternative identities, including that of a lesbian subjectivity. Those tales that include dolls or doll-like women seem especially important in this context for, if the doll functions as a transitional object, then it should assist the assertion of an independent identity. However, it would seem that, for Lee, the expression of a lesbian sexual identity creates a complex and circular engagement with the doll. If the doll represents the body of

<sup>98</sup> Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930* (London: Pandora Press, 1985), pp. 112-13.

the mother, then the separation *from* that body is hampered by a need to return *to* that body as the object of sexual desire. Nevertheless, in the illusory ‘potential space’ of fantastic fiction, the figure of the doll facilitates an engagement with the female body, allowing a regression into the fluidity of a pre-Oedipal asexual identity, which simultaneously permits a ‘homosexual’ desire for a woman (that is, the mother). But doll-games, according to Watson, also stage ‘an active emulation of maternal power’ (491), and it is the doll’s role in licensing alternative identities and desires that I intend to explore as I now turn to four of Lee’s tales: ‘A Wedding Chest’ (1904), ‘Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child’ (1905), ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’ (1896), and ‘The Doll’ (1927).<sup>99</sup>

### ‘A Wedding Chest’

As Lee’s tale begins, a panel of the wedding chest in question is encountered as item no. 428 in the Catalogue of the Smith Museum, Leeds, to which it was bequeathed in 1878 by the widow of the deceased ‘Rev. Lawson Stone, late fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge’ (115). It is described as:

A panel (five feet by two feet three inches) formerly the front of a *cassone* or coffer, intended to contain the garments and jewels of a bride. *Subject*: ‘The

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<sup>99</sup> ‘A Wedding Chest’ appears in *Pope Jacynth and Other Fantastic Tales*, (London: Grant Richards, 1904), pp. 115-136. ‘Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child’ was first published in the *Fortnightly Review*, o.s. 84, n.s. 78, (1905), 1-16, repeated in ‘Sister Benvenuta’ (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1905). All quotations are taken from the *Fortnightly Review*. ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’ was first published in French as ‘La Madonne aux sept glaives’, in *Feuilleton du Journal des Débats du Samedi*, February 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 1896, n. pag, repeated in *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (London: John Lane, the Bodley Head, 1927) as ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’, pp. 95-140, which also contains ‘The Doll’, pp. 209-23. All quotations are taken from the versions in *For Maurice*. All subsequent references to each of these tales will be given in the text.



Triumph of Love.’ ‘Umbrian School of the Fifteenth Century.’ In the right-hand corner is a half-effaced inscription: *Desider ... de Civitate Lac ... me ... ecit*. This valuable painting is unfortunately much damaged by damp and mineral corrosives, owing probably to its having contained at one time buried treasure (115).<sup>100</sup>

After this preliminary description of the panel’s present location, Lee takes us back to the past and to the making of the wedding chest and its disturbing story. We are told that the chest was commissioned by Messer Troilo Baglioni from Ser Piero Bontempi, the employer and prospective father-in-law of the craftsman Desiderio who was to wed Maddalena, Ser Piero’s daughter, on the coming St John’s Eve. Working on the front panel of the chest, Desiderio had chosen to depict scenes from Petrarch’s “The Triumph of Love”, dividing the panel into four sections each ‘intended to represent the four phases of the amorous passion’ (116). In the middle section, Desiderio had represented Love, as ‘a naked youth, with wings of wondrous changing colours, enthroned upon a chariot, the axle and wheels of which were red gold, and covered with a cloth of gold of such subtle device that that whole chariot seemed really to be on fire’ (117). On the youth’s back ‘hung a bow and a quiver full of dreadful arrows’ and round his eyes was bound ‘a kerchief fringed with gold, to show that Love strikes blindly’ (117-18). Around Love’s chariot ‘crowded those who have been famous for their love’ among which are ‘Orpheus, seeking for Eurydice with his lute’, ‘Socrates’ and Desiderio himself, as a bridegroom-to-be (118-19). But Desiderio refuses to include his beloved, Monna Maddalena, in the procession arguing that ‘it was not fit that modest damsels should lend their face to other folk’, though the true reason lay in his reluctance to depict Maddalena on a chest to be

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<sup>100</sup> The Smith Museum, Leeds, is apparently Lee’s invention for there seems to be no historical record of its existence.

owned by Troilo (who also desires Maddalena) for, 'in reality he had often portrayed [sic] Monna Maddalena ... though only, it is true, in the figure of Our Lady, the Mother of God' (119-20).<sup>101</sup> Despite Desiderio's precautions, Troilo, 'a most beautiful youth' his skin 'astonishingly white and fair like a woman's' and of 'a very amorous nature' is 'determined to possess himself' of Maddalena (122-23). On the eve of her wedding to Desiderio, Maddalena is abducted 'vainly screaming, like another Proserpina' and although the perpetrators wear the 'green and yellow colours' of Troilo's family, rumour decided that Maddalena had fled willingly with a lover (124-25). A year after Maddalena's disappearance, she is returned to Desiderio and her father in 'a coffer, wrapped in black baize' the very same coffer that Desiderio had made at Troilo's request accompanied by a piece of parchment which declared this to be 'a wedding gift' to Desiderio 'from Troilo Baglioni of Fratta' (126). Raising the lid, Ser Piero and Desiderio:

came to a piece of red cloth, such as is used for mules; *etiam*, a fold of common linen; and below it, a coverlet of green silk, which, being raised, their eyes were met ... by the body of Monna Maddalena, naked as God had made it, dead with two stabs in the neck, the long golden hair tied with pearls but dabbed in blood; the which Maddalena was cruelly squeezed into that coffer, having on her breast the body of an infant recently born, dead like herself (127).

Stunned into silence, Desiderio digs a deep grave in Ser Piero's garden 'abounding in flowers and trees' watered by 'stone canals ... fed from a fountain where you might see a mermaid squeezing the water from her breasts' (127-28). With the help of Ser Piero, Desiderio prepares Maddalena's body for burial, tenderly lifting it out of the wedding

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<sup>101</sup> The name 'Maddalena' or 'Magdalen' suggests Mary Magdalen, i.e. a fallen woman, prefiguring Maddalena's fate, and also recalling the conflation of the pure and fallen woman in art as in Browning's 'Fra Lippo Lippi' in *Men and Women* (1855).



chest, washing it 'in odorous waters', dressing it 'in fine linen and bridal garments' before returning her to the coffer and laying her on 'folds of fine damask and brocade', her head

upon a pillow of silver cloth, a wreath of roses, which Desiderio himself plaited, on her hair, so that she looked like a holy saint or the damsel Julia, daughter of the Emperor Augustus Caesar, who was discovered buried on the Appian Way' (128-29).

The chest is filled with herbs and spices and a certain gum believed to prevent the earthly corruption of the body, and Maddalena's corpse is finally laid to rest in the ground. The body of her child, however, is tossed in a place, 'near Saint Herculaneus, where the refuse and offal and dead animals are thrown, called the *Sardegna*; because it was the bastard of Ser Troilo, *et infamiae scelerisque partum*' (130). Seeing the danger of Desiderio's imprecations against Troilo, Ser Piero advises him to leave Perugia in order to escape the wrath of Troilo's family, and Desiderio goes to Rome where his work is a great success. However, after seven years of self-imposed exile, Desiderio hears of Ser Piero's death and that Troilo is in Perugia raising an army for the Duke of Urbino. Disguised as a Greek, Desiderio returns to Perugia and, having confessed his sins and received the Eucharist, makes a vow 'never to touch food save the Body of Christ till he could taste of the blood of Messer Troilo' (132). Soon he encounters Troilo, 'dressed in grey silk hose, and a doublet of red cloth and gold brocade', his face still young and unbearded, 'a face like Hyacinthus or Ganymede', on his way to visit a courtesan (133). A fight ensues, and Desiderio stabs Troilo in the chest. As he dies, Desiderio, 'stooped over his chest, and lapped up the blood as it flowed; and it was the first food he tasted since taking the Body

of Christ, even as he had sworn' (134). When Troilo's body is found, 'many folk, particularly painters' come to look at him and to admire 'his great beauty' (135). Having kept his vow, Desiderio unearths the wedding chest and travels to Arezzo where he preserved with him 'always the body of Monna Maddalena in the wedding chest painted with the Triumph of Love' (136).

In 'A Wedding Chest' we return to a Renaissance past, one of those imaginative spaces in which, according to Martha Vicinus 'the lesbian imagination might flourish'.<sup>102</sup> For Vicinus, Lee's imagination finds its outlet, in this tale, in the figure of Troilo, that young, beautiful, beardless, and effeminate boy, who acts as the focus and/or mediator of homosexual desire in fin-de-siècle literature. Vicinus argues that:

Even though many male homosexuals were not pederasts and most lesbians did not look like boys, the boy was the defining, free agent who best expressed who they were. We repeatedly are asked to look - and then look again - to see the hidden meaning of the beautiful boy.<sup>103</sup>

Vicinus suggests that, in his role as a subvertor of marriage, Troilo represents Lee revenging herself 'upon husbands and fiancés' that impede her desire.<sup>104</sup> However, for Vicinus, the other characters in the 'tragic triangle' are also facets of Lee. Desiderio is the

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<sup>102</sup> Vicinus, p. 101.

<sup>103</sup> Vicinus, p. 92. It seems worth noting that Lee playfully adopts the persona of the 'boy' in her introduction to *Belcaro* in which she describes the collection as 'not the Sir-Oracle manual of a professor' but 'the copy books of the boy attending a course of lectures' and Lee was also to compare Clementina Anstruther-Thomson to 'a very beautiful and modest boy' (pp. 5, 14). See Vineta Colby, 'The Puritan Aesthete: Vernon Lee', in *The Singular Anomaly: Women Novelists of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), pp. 235-304, (p. 290).

<sup>104</sup> Vernon Lee's opposition to her close Friend Mary Robinson's first marriage to James Darmsteter, is well documented in Peter Gunn's biography, and in the abridged collection of letters edited by Irene Cooper Willis. See *Vernon Lee's Letters, with a Preface by her executor (I. C. Willis)* (London: Privately printed, 1937). The full transcripts, describing the anguish and vehemence of Lee's feelings are in Special Collections, Colby College Library, Colby College, Waterville, Maine, USA.



lover 'who - like Vernon Lee - desires too strongly' and Maddalena is 'the unfortunate victim who - like Vernon Lee - never speaks'.<sup>105</sup> Whilst I agree in principle with Vicinus's reading, I believe that the interrelationship between the three characters and their significance for Vernon Lee is far more complex than Vicinus's triangle would suggest. Troilo's effeminacy and his affinity with 'Hyacinthus' and 'Ganymede', are suggestive of the castrato, an association which is strengthened when we discover the similarities between descriptions of Troilo and the figure of Love depicted on the wedding chest. The colours of red and gold used to represent Love are repeated in the final image of Troilo who wears 'a doublet of red cloth and gold brocade' (133). His 'hat of scarlet cloth with many feathers' (133) is a prosaic version of Love's 'wings of wondrous changing colours' (117), and instead of Love's arrows, Troilo carries a sword. As a double of Eros, Troilo, too, is 'double-sexed', and like his Greek counterpart, his acts of desire are accompanied by a disturbing violence: his 'love' like that of Eros, is charged with the threat of violence and death, a threat which has its own implications, for Vicinus argues that 'Lee frequently used violence and death to represent the destructive nature of same-sex relations'.<sup>106</sup> Eros's 'blindness' also has interesting connotations for, in Freudian terms, blindness is linked with castration and, Troilo is therefore, by association, linked with the 'castrato': a figure which, as we have seen, has special significance in Lee's negotiation of her lesbian identity.<sup>107</sup> What is even more intriguing, however, is the conflation of the figures of Troilo and Desiderio. Although seemingly antithetical: artisan/noble, man/boy, they are

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<sup>105</sup> Vicinus, p. 107.

<sup>106</sup> Graves, p. 30; Vicinus, p. 107.

<sup>107</sup> Writing of Freud's essay, ' "The 'Uncanny" ', Samuel Weber points out that Freud's reading of Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* (The Sandman) in this text 'leads Freud to the conclusion that the uncanny effect of the tale resides in the dread of losing one's eyes, which in turn is for Freud nothing but a substitute manifestation of castration-anxiety' (p. 1105).

‘unified’ in their desire for Maddalena. Moreover, Desiderio’s vampire-like lapping of Troilo’s blood, arguably functions as an act of introjection which, given the ‘two stabs’ that mark Maddalena’s neck, suggests a form of vampiric consummation of his relationship with Maddalena mediated via the androgynous body of Troilo’s corpse: an act which ‘feminizes’ Desiderio in the process, for it involves an homoerotic engagement with Troilo’s body.<sup>108</sup> It is perhaps no accident that this ‘sexual’ consummation should be effected through Troilo, for the word ‘troilism’ suggested by this act has a particular significance. Not only does it mean ‘sexual activity in which three persons take part simultaneously’, but it has now come to define ‘a psychotic sexual manifestation in which the patient desires the sexual partner of the person for whom he has homosexual yearnings’.<sup>109</sup> In the light of this definition, the fusion of Troilo, Maddalena, and Desiderio implicit in the process encodes not only heterosexual, but also homosexual, desire. Moreover, Desiderio’s act of introjection seems particularly significant because it is staged as a religious process, the fulfilment of Desiderio’s vow ‘never to touch food save the Body of Christ till he could taste of the blood of Messer Troilo’ (132). Involuntarily, we conflate the two actions, and Desiderio becomes an actor in a pagan ritual, reminiscent of a participant in a Dionysiac mystery which allows the transgression of sexual boundaries, and the opportunity to ‘*stop being yourself*’, to access other identities.<sup>110</sup> But the focus of our gaze, as for Troilo and Desiderio, is the body of Monna

<sup>108</sup> The doubling between Troilo and Maddalena is implicit in the tale, not only due to the vampiric marks that suggest his penetration and introjection of her, but also as artistic images. Maddalena’s face has been employed by Desiderio as a model for images of the Virgin Mary in paintings, and in death, Troilo, too, becomes a focus of the artist’s gaze when ‘painters [come] to look at him for his great beauty’ (p. 135).

<sup>109</sup> *O.E.D.*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). The later definition was given in *Dorland’s Medical Dictionary* in 1941.

<sup>110</sup> Paglia, p. 97.



Maddalena. Lying dead in her coffer, under red and green cloths, her hair tied with pearls, and her foetus at her breast, Maddalena is reminiscent of an anatomical Venus, a doll-like effigy of her former self. Given Lee's dislike of red and green, here symbolising perhaps penetration and pollution, it is unsurprising that Maddalena's body undergoes a process of purification and 'mummification' that transforms her into 'a holy saint or the damsel Julia' (129).<sup>111</sup> Yet in referring to Maddalena as another 'Julia', this 'purification' of her body is undermined. Like Julia, Maddalena is now 'at once an artifact and a body': an 'auto-icon', 'signifying a representation that consists of the thing itself'.<sup>112</sup> Unlike the anatomical Venuses and those recreations of the bodies of saints and martyrs, Maddalena's body, though apparently masking the process of putrefaction, still contains the threat of contamination implicit in its internal decay. In addition, despite its purification and the disposal of her illegitimate foetus, Maddalena's body is the body of a mother and, more importantly, arguably also the body of *the* Mother, - the Virgin Mary - for Maddalena's corpse, which now represents her living body, is doubled in all the still and silent images of 'Our Lady, the Mother of God' (120) which Desiderio painted in her likeness.<sup>113</sup> Moreover, as 'auto-icon' Maddalena's body functions as a 'fetish': it is a 'lost object preserved by virtue of the fetish substitute' which represents not only the ' "impossible" feminine phallus but an "imagined" maternal body'.<sup>114</sup> In 'preserving with him always the body of Monna Maddalena', Desiderio 'regresses' to a pre-Oedipal

<sup>111</sup> Lee's interest in processes of mummification was to continue late into life. In her library, now held by the British Institute in Florence, is W. J. Perry's *The Origin of Magic and Religion* (London: Methuen, 1923). In Ch. 3 of the text, a section which deals with 'Early Ideas About Death', Lee marks passages which describe Egyptian processes of mummification and the development of the portrait statue (pp. 48-49).

<sup>112</sup> Pearsall, p. 57; Bronfen, p. 96.

<sup>113</sup> The mermaid squeezing water from her breasts in the garden in which Maddalena is buried, suggests a continuation of the eroticized maternal image belied by the 'purification' carried out on Maddalena's sexually defiled body.

<sup>114</sup> Bronfen, pp. 96-97.

space, a space of indeterminate sexuality where he takes the place of Maddalena's dead child, and simultaneously plays a 'doll-game' that turns his 'Madonna' into a 'boytoy' (136). But in order to look at Maddalena, Desiderio must open the coffer and, in doing so he enacts an entry into the maternal body for, in recalling the anatomical Venus, Maddalena's body is like theirs, one of those 'wax cases ... whose "lids" are opened up to reveal the insides, the mysterious organs of sexuality and reproduction',<sup>115</sup> an organic counterpart of the wedding chest 'intended to contain the ... jewels of a bride' and containing at one time, 'buried treasure' (115).<sup>116</sup> If in 'doll-games' the doll can represent both mother and child, this entry stages an erotic engagement with the body of the mother even as it reconstructs a fantasy of pre-Oedipal symbiosis. The stigmata that stain Maddalena's body and their sexual implications continue to exert their influence despite purification. In 'A Wedding Chest', then, we find familiar echoes of those processes of regression which enable the assumption of a fluid identity, and sanction a return to the maternal body in Lee's tales. While in this tale these elements are veiled in a complex system of identifications, 'Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child' and 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers' offer a more direct engagement with the maternal and, more particularly, the Marian body: a body which has interesting implications for Lee's negotiation of her lesbian identity.

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<sup>115</sup> Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, p. 128.

<sup>116</sup> Interestingly, Burdett Gardner notes that in a passage from *Miss Brown*, Anne Brown is similarly 'encased'. Gardner writes, 'Seen during a service at the cathedral this Ethiop-Scotch servant girl of his friend Melton Perry, eschews "kneeling and stooping" and becomes in the eye of Hamlin "The Madonna of the place." But both her "diaphanous pallor" and the later description of the cathedral itself as "carved like a precious casket," suggest that she is a dead Madonna' (Gardner, p. 369). While Gardner fails to associate the dead Maddalena directly with the corpse-like Anne and neither with the anatomical Venuses, it is evident that there is a subtle link between them that is suggestive in the context of this chapter.



### **‘Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child’**

This later tale, by its title alone evokes an image of the Virgin and child. Yet Sister Benvenuta, born to ‘the illustrious Venetian family of Loredan’ (1), proves an unconventional Madonna. Lee’s tale begins with an editorial preamble that half-frames Sister Benvenuta’s diary entries. We are told that after death Benvenuta had become ‘the chief object of devotion to young children and their fond mothers in the town of Cividale’ (1), and particularly to young girls who would process annually through the town in her honour. Sister Benvenuta’s popularity leads to her family’s request for her beatification, and it is as a result of this that her diaries are read and are here reproduced by the editor to ‘perhaps shed some light both on her real claims to beatification, and on the reason why these claims were not officially admitted’ (2). Her narrative hinges on her love for the doll that represents the Christ Child during the Christmas period and to whom she addresses her diary. Sister Benvenuta’s devotion to the Christ doll seems to be linked to her childhood obsession with a portrait of the Madonna and child that she would gaze at for hours in solitary contemplation, and which she describes to the doll in her diary:

The picture was the most beautiful picture in the world. It was divided by columns, with garlands of fruit about them, and in the middle, on a ground of gold, all divided into rows and all variegated with russet and orange, like the sunset, was the Madonna’s throne, with the Madonna on it, a beautiful lady, though not so beautifully dressed as my mother, and with no paint on her face, and not showing her teeth in a smile ... And on the Virgin’s knee who should be lying asleep, fast asleep, but You - You, my dearest Great Little One ... The whole of Paradise waited for You to awake and smile; and I sat and waited also, perched on the altar, till it was too dark to see anything save the glimmering gold (13).

But the effigy of the Christ Child is not the only doll that appears in Benvenuta's story.

At Eastertime, the Abbess decides to hold a puppet show at the convent which is attended by the eminent citizens of the town. For Sister Benvenuta the female puppets are disturbing reproductions of the doll-like women she encountered in the outside world:

I do not really like the puppets representing ladies, though they have lovely skirts of flowered cloth of silver and *andriennes* making their hips stick out, and bodices full of seed pearl, and patches on their cheeks and red paint, just like the real ladies who used to come and drink chocolate with my mother and my aunts (5).

Later, the Madonna effigies used for religious ceremonies are conflated with these puppets and the Mother Superior's examination of their 'shoes and stockings and lace pocket handkerchiefs' is labelled 'the continuation of the puppet show in the Mother Abbess' (9). Amongst these puppets is the figure of the Devil. Unlike the female marionettes, who in their dominoes and hooped skirts recall the women of Venice who inspired fear and unease in the young Benvenuta, this puppet is an object of fun. She writes:

When we were looking again at the puppets to-day ... there was one which made me burst out laughing, till I nearly cried; and it was very foolish and wrong as Sister Grimana told me, for I knew the whole time that puppet represented the Devil ... I know it is wrong, and I have often prayed that I might learn to fear the Evil One, but I never could, and all the pictures of him, and the things they tell ... have always made me laugh (5-6).

Faced with aborted attempts at making a suitable coat for her beloved Christ doll, Benvenuta enters into a 'Faustian' contract, selling her soul for the Devil's assistance.



The puppet appears in her cell, unchanged except in size, for she notes that he ‘seemed, somehow, bigger - as big as myself’ and she could not tell ‘whether or not he had any wires and strings about him’ (11). Having signed her name in blood, Benvenuta asserts, ‘I never crossed myself nor ejaculated any form of exorcism, because, you see, I had told him to come, and it was a piece of business’ (11). The postscript to Benvenuta’s story is written by a fellow nun who describes the scene she found:

The cell was streaming with light, as of hundreds of tapers; and in the midst of it, and of this fountain of radiance, was seated Sister Benvenuta, and on her knees, erect, stood no other but the Child Christ (15).

As the light fades this animated scene quickly converts into a fixed tableau. In a pose reminiscent of the *pietà*, Benvenuta, now ‘stone dead and already cold’ holds the lifeless ‘waxen image of the Little Saviour’ in her arms: her mouth and eyes open in rapture (15-16).

As the ‘heavenly advocate’ of puppeteers, Benvenuta can evidently be identified with Lee who, as Maurice Baring observed, acts as ‘a mediatrix’ between the world of dolls and puppets and our own (2).<sup>117</sup> Like Lee, Benvenuta indicates her dislike of painted women and dolls alike, preferring instead the beautiful Madonna ‘with no paint on her face’ that presides over the altar in Benvenuta’s family chapel (13). Yet, ironically, this Madonna’s face *is* painted, for it is constructed from the colours of an artist’s palette and, as such, she is intrinsically related to her doubles, those doll-Madonnas with their embroidered dresses, stockings, and lace pocket handkerchiefs, who are themselves the

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<sup>117</sup> Quoted in Navarette, p. 157.

religious counterparts of the lady puppets, with their 'skirts of flowered cloth of silver ... and bodices full of seed pearl' that remind Benvenuta of the Venetian women of her past (5). Given the contemporaneity between Freud's 'Dora' (1905) and Lee's story (written in the same year), Benvenuta's hours of contemplation in front of the painting of the Madonna inevitably recall those of Freud's Dora, who, as we learned in the previous chapter, spent '*two hours* in front of the Sistine Madonna rapt in silent admiration'.<sup>118</sup> Following Mary Bittner Wiseman's argument that, instead of identifying with the Madonna, (as suggested by Freud), Dora may have either desired the Madonna or wanted to be loved like the Christ Child held in the Virgin's arms, Benvenuta's enchantment with the Madonna painting takes on a greater significance.<sup>119</sup> If we accept that Benvenuta is, at some level, a facet of Vernon Lee, then the former's love for the Virgin and the Christ Child, and her willingness to 'sell her soul' for the pleasure of an eternal fusion in which she 'becomes' the former and unites with the latter, are suggestive. In her discussions of the maternal erotic, Helene Deutsch cites a lesbian case study in which the relationship between the two women is described as 'a perfectly conscious mother and child situation, in which sometimes the one and sometimes the other played the part of the mother', enacting a process of pre-Oedipal union that we have come to understand as one of the psychoanalytical models of lesbian desire.<sup>120</sup> That in Lee's tale this image of pre-Oedipal

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<sup>118</sup> Quoted in Wiseman, p. 92.

<sup>119</sup> Wiseman, p. 93.

<sup>120</sup> Quoted in Noreen O'Connor and Joanna Ryan, *Wild Desires and Mistaken Identities: Lesbianism and Psychoanalysis* (London: Virago, 1993), p. 63. In *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), Teresa de Lauretis argues that 'the public discourses on lesbian sexuality available in this century [20th]' including lesbianism as pre-Oedipal fusion, 'are all inadequate to the task' (p. 75). However, as de Lauretis's alternative is predicated on fetishism, which seems yet another discourse to add to those already in existence, I will continue to use those models already offered by Psychoanalysis.



fusion is figured via the image of the Virgin Mary seems significant for, at the turn of the twentieth century Mariology, according to Ruth Vanita, is linked with homosexuality. In her book *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same-Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination*, Vanita argues that, 'The figure of the Virgin seems to have had special attractions for same-sex communities, such as the Anglican sisterhoods established under the influence of Edward Pusey, and ... for homoerotically inclined men and women, both individually and as communities'.<sup>121</sup> Vanita writes that:

Mary, flying in the face of biology and heterosexual normativity, is the exemplary figure for the odd lives of male and female saints who choose same-sex community over marriage ... It does not seem to me accidental that a liturgy to the Virgin is part of every ceremony of same-sex union unearthed by John Boswell; she is called upon to bless these unions along with Christ and other saints but is not invoked in the same way in heterosexual marriage services ... And, in the nineteenth century, homosexual men were referred to as 'Maryannes' - the combined names of Mary and of the mother who immaculately conceived her.<sup>122</sup>

Adding credence to Vanita's hypothesis, Ewa Kuryluk, tracing an association between the Virgin Mary and St Veronica observes that both are celebrated in February, a month whose name is etymologically linked to purification.<sup>123</sup> The 'most ancient festival in honor of Mary' is celebrated on the second, a feast day which is considered 'the day of homosexuals in Bulgaria' and on the fourth, St. Fiacre, the patron saint of 'hemorrhoids [*sic*], male flux, and gays' is occasionally celebrated 'together with St. Veronica on Mardi

<sup>121</sup> Ruth Vanita, *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same-Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 19.

<sup>122</sup> Vanita, pp. 8-9.

<sup>123</sup> February comes from the name 'Februarius' which is derived from *februare* (purify) or from Februa, the Roman festival of expiation and lustration, held in the second half of February. See Ewa Kuryluk, *Veronica and Her Cloth: History, Symbolism, and Structure of a 'True' Image* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 114.

Gras'.<sup>124</sup> In 'Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child', a tale framed by its Marian image, it is worth noting a possible hidden significance of the marionettes that abound in its pages for, as Susan Navarette explains:

the term marionettes, meaning 'little Maries,' refers to the diminutive versions sold by Venetian toy venders [sic] of the 'Marioles' or 'Marie di legno' [wooden Marie] or 'Marione' [big Maries], pious images associated with the annual festival of the Maries, in which mechanical figures eventually came to substitute for the girls who, in the earliest years of the festival, were selected to represent twelve Venetian maidens who had been abducted by Barbary pirates, rescued and then married - the puppets reenacting, that is, the narrative in which the virgin is threatened with dishonor and then reclaimed, her sexuality ceded to the state of marriage.<sup>125</sup>

With its carnivalesque Venetian background, Lee's tale seems to play with the homosexual associations that surround Marian imagery. These associations are implicit in Sister Benvenuta herself for her delight in the chapel's Madonna replaces the fear she senses as a child as she looks at the 'coloured prints of nuns of various orders' that hang in her bedroom at the villa by the Brenta in which the nuns, members of same-sex communities, harbour perhaps uncomfortable connotations with that 'autoeroticism or lesbianism' which figures in such works such Diderot's *La Religieuse* (1780), (12).<sup>126</sup> Unsurprisingly, then, Benvenuta is 'purified' as she 'becomes' a Madonna in the final moments of the tale. Interestingly, however, this image of Sister Benvenuta as an 'alternative Virgin', does not completely erase those homosexual identifications. As a

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<sup>124</sup> Kuryluk, p. 115.

<sup>125</sup> Navarette, p. 167.

<sup>126</sup> Vanita, p. 30.



result of her transformation, worship of her forms a ‘regular cultus’ and she is celebrated by mothers and children, and, most particularly, by young girls in the town of Cividale, indicating an implicit reference to same-sex desire which is obscured in the image of pre-Oedipal fusion (4).

Benvenuta’s identification with the Virgin is foreshadowed as the tale progresses and she resolves to make the Christ doll a coat for, in legends and representations, ‘a spinning, weaving, and embroidering Virgin’ comes to be identified as the seamstress that makes the seamless tunic worn by Jesus during his Passion.<sup>127</sup> Ewa Kuryluk tells us that this association dates from the late Middle Ages, and that around 1400, ‘various allusions to the crucifixion begin to appear in the scenes of nativity and infancy’, usually symbolized by Christ’s garment.<sup>128</sup> Such allusions appear on a variety of media: on the ‘right wing of the Buxtehude altarpiece (ca.1410) Mary is knitting the seamless tunic with four needles on the porch of her house’, a ‘Silesian wood carving (ca. 1500)’ shows Mary completing ‘her child’s garment which she has put on a tailor’s dummy’ and ‘in an enchanting fifteenth-century drawing, probably a copy after a lost painting by Konrad Witz (ca. 1400-45 or 1446)’ the Virgin ‘contemplates the seamless coat ... in her hands, while a naked infant Jesus, a mini-Narcissus and Amor, gazes at his mirror image in a round washbasin’.<sup>129</sup> Kuryluk argues that the fabric of this ‘seamless tunic’ ‘plays a central role in the passion narratives, and in particular in the Gospel of John which specifies that Jesus wears a “tunic ... without seam, woven from top to bottom” (Jn. 19:23) - a second skin whose removal foreshadows death’: a cloth functioning, for

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<sup>127</sup> Kuryluk, p. 193.

<sup>128</sup> Kuryluk, p. 194.

<sup>129</sup> Kuryluk, p. 194-95.

example as ‘an empty shell and double’ in Gerard David’s *Crucifixion* (1480-90), in which Jesus ‘is being nailed to the cross which lies on the ground next to his tunic’.<sup>130</sup> If losing one’s skin is associated with death, then gaining one’s skin is associated with coming alive, an analogy that Kuryluk traces in biblical stories such as that of Job who, speaking to God, says, ‘ “Thou didst clothe me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews” (Job 10:11)’.<sup>131</sup> The analogy has interesting implications for Benvenuta’s Christ Child. Although she fantasizes that the Christ doll is animate, believing that he can feel the cold, ‘so chilly in that Sacristy cupboard’ (6), it is only at the end of the tale, when the garment made by Benvenuta, ‘veined’ with gold and silver has slipped to the floor, that the Christ doll momentarily comes alive, before being fixed forever in Benvenuta’s arms. One might suggest that it is this magical coat that is instrumental in his animation, and that ‘flayed’ of his skin, the Christ Child returns to his embryonic body and ‘dies’ once more. ‘Flayed’ this body prefigures Christ in his Passion, his naked body stained with stigmata, reminiscent of the naked, and ‘marked’ dead women in Lee’s tales. But this body also recalls that of the satyr Marsyas, Jesus’s pagan counterpart who, for Kuryluk, as for Simon Richter, is associated with Christ for, as a ‘silently suffering creature, [he is] clearly the prototype of the crucified’.<sup>132</sup> But in the last chapter, as we have seen, both Christ and Marsyas have a prosaic double in the castrato: a doubling which is figured in this tale in the image of the Christ Child as ‘Amor’ in the chapel painting, recalling the blind, and therefore ‘castrated’ figure of Love in ‘A

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<sup>130</sup> Kuryluk, pp. 187, 193.

<sup>131</sup> Quoted in Kuryluk, p. 185.

<sup>132</sup> Kuryluk, p. 211.



Wedding Chest'.<sup>133</sup> Given the association between the castrato figure and Lee's lesbian sexuality, it would seem that the fusion between Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child is more complex than a superficial reading might imply. It is a fusion that repeats a lesbian engagement with the maternal body both in Benvenuta's appropriation of the Madonna, and in a return to a pre-Oedipal symbiosis of lesbian desire figured through the castrato body implicit in the Christ Child. It would seem that, in this tale, Lee manages to create a fantasy that fulfils the desire for the Madonna, and simultaneously shows that love returned. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the moment of fusion is represented as a moment of jouissance, figured in a flickering blaze of light reminiscent of *poikilos*: a phenomenon which, as we have seen, serves to encode homosexual desire.

Lee's negotiation of a sexual identity via the figure of the Virgin Mary may seem odd to those who are aware of her rejection of conventional religion. In *Baldwin* (1886), two dialogues, 'The Responsibilities of Unbelief' (which appeared in the *Contemporary* in 1883), and 'The Consolations of Belief', set out 'the reasons which led her to reject the Christian conception of God, and to replace the precepts of a theocentric ethics by those of what might be termed an evolutionary humanism'.<sup>134</sup> Yet despite this, Lee was to acknowledge the power that the Marian image held for her. In the introduction to *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories* (1927), Lee confesses:

if I have anywhere in my soul a secret shrine, it is to Our Lady. Even I don't like living in places which her benignant effigy does not consecrate to sweet and noble

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<sup>133</sup> The final image of Benvenuta and the Christ Child functions as an ostensibly 'purified' double to the image of Maddalena and her foetus in 'A Wedding Chest'. In always preserving with him the body of the mother - Maddalena - Desiderio, via his introjection of Troilo, becomes an androgynized double of the figure of Love, and also of 'Amor' in 'Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child'.

<sup>134</sup> Gunn, p. 113.

thoughts. For is she not the divine Mother of Gods as well as God, Demeter or Mary, in whom the sad and ugly things of our bodily origin and nourishment are transfigured into the grace of the immortal spirit?<sup>135</sup>

Interestingly, it is Mary's role in 'purifying' conception, (and therefore, by implication sexual relations), and physical engagement with the maternal body that appeals to Vernon Lee. It is only to be expected, then, that her ideal Madonna should be the Madonna who feeds her child from her breast bathed in a halo of immaculate divinity. Explaining to Maurice Baring the origins of her tale, 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers', Lee expresses her aversion to Spanish Madonnas who, for Lee, do not fit this image:<sup>136</sup>

And just in proportion to that natural devotion of mine to the Beloved Lady and Mother, Italian or High Dutch, who opens her scanty drapery to suckle a baby divinity, just in proportion did that aversion concentrate on those doll-madonnas in Spanish churches, all pomp and whalebone and sorrow and tears wept into Mechlin lace.

For Lee, these wax doll-madonnas, with their uncanny verisimilitude to the female body, are perhaps too disturbing as objects of adoration and reverence outside the realms of

<sup>135</sup> Lee, introduction to *For Maurice*, pp. xvii-xviii.

<sup>136</sup> Lee, introduction to *For Maurice*, p. xix. Lee's distaste for these Spanish madonnas, (encountered during her sojourn in Granada early in 1889) is clear in this introduction written in 1927. It would seem that they made a lasting impression on her. The original reference to them, made in her *Commonplace Book* (n.s. 4, Special Collections, Colby College Library), demonstrates the intensity of the impression, and includes many of the features which are later incorporated in 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers'. Describing Granada, Lee writes: 'In everymost [path and] church gold foil enough to make [your] eyes ache [and] ... spirals, garlands, enough to make [your] head spin; paper flowers, chandeliers, silver ... everywhere; and in all this, on every altar, not a picture or a statue, but a monstrous painted [and] bedizened doll - a bleeding Christ with a velvet spangled petticoat round his loins, an enthroned madonna in agony, but with hoop, ... stays, lace veil [and] tinsel diadem. Always dolls, and always dolls in agony - For every madonna with her child, for every peaceful mother you may count ten dolorosas, weeping, wringing hands, the seven daggers stuck on or near them ... It is always wealth, pomp, ceremonial, [and] wounds [and] death' (pp. 28-29). The almost 'delirious' quality of this piece suggests that these doll-madonnas and their male counterparts, 'the bleeding Christs' were a source of disturbance and unease for Lee and, evidently, continued to be so for there are echoes of them seven years later in 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers' and in 'Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child' published sixteen years later in 1905.



fantasy. Yet, Lee's tale stages a metaphorical journey into this female, and more significantly, this maternal body: a journey which once again figures subtle shifts in gender and a negotiation of sexual identity mediated, as in 'A Wedding Chest', via images of heterosexual desire.

### **'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers'**

Lee's tale, 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers', centres on Don Juan Gusman del Pulgar, Count of Miramor.<sup>137</sup> Like his legendary counterpart, Miramor is both 'conquering super-rake and super-ruffian', and is known for his sexual exploits and for the ensuing conflicts with husbands, fathers, and brothers that often end in murder.<sup>138</sup> Don Juan's saving grace is his devotion to 'Our Lady of the Seven Daggers of Grenada' [*sic*], a doll-like effigy attired in tawdry splendour:

Her skirts bulge out in melon-shaped folds, all damasked with minute heartsease, and brocaded with silver roses; the reddish shimmer of the gold wire, the bluish shimmer of the silver floss, blending into a strange melancholy hue without a definite name. Her body is cased like a knife in its sheath, the mysterious russet and violet of the silk made less definable still by the network of seed pearl, and the veils of delicate lace falling from head to waist. Her face, which surmounts rows upon rows of pearls, is made of wax, white with black glass eyes and a tiny coral mouth ... Her head is crowned with a great jewelled crown; ... In her bodice, a little clearing is made among the brocade and the seed pearl, and into this are stuck seven gold-hilted knives (97-98).

<sup>137</sup> Another Don Juan figured previously in Lee's *Juvenilia* (1887) in the essay, 'Don Juan (con Stenterello)', and aspects of this early work, including an encounter with a mysterious supernatural woman, and a confrontation with a dead mirror image, remain in the later tale. See Vernon Lee, *Juvenilia: Being a Second Series of Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions*, 2 vols (London: Fisher Unwin, 1887), II, pp. 77-98.

<sup>138</sup> Lee, introduction to *For Maurice*, p. xix.

Sated by the pleasures of earthly women, Don Juan eventually seeks fulfilment in other-worldly realms, and asks the Virgin to protect him as he ventures illegally into the Alhambra in search of the sleeping Infanta and her treasures, both of which he aims to take using necromantic means. Employing the occult knowledge of an accomplice (whose assistance is rewarded with death), Don Juan succeeds in raising the spirit whose giant hand 'turned slowly in a secret lock the flag-shaped key engraven on the inside vault of the portal' (111). Don Juan proceeds, 'swinging his bare sword horizontally in his right hand' as he advances 'into the darkness of the tower' (112). The lock and key imagery that precedes Don Juan's penetration of the Alhambra arguably defines this as a 'feminine' space and this image intensifies as Don Juan continues his journey:

Don Juan Gusman del Pulgar plunged down a narrow corridor, as black as the shaft of a mine, following the little speck of reddish light which seemed to advance before him ... Underfoot, the ground was slippery with innumerable little snakes, who, instead of being crushed, just wriggled under the feet. The corridor was rendered even more gruesome by the fact that it was a strongly inclined plane, and that one seemed to be walking straight into a pit (113).

It seems significant that in this threatening female space, with its snakes that can't be crushed, Don Juan hears the plaintive whisperings of the lovers he has spurned and ruined. Like sirens they appear to lure him to the bottom of a shaft in which the reddish speck of light, reminiscent of the blood-red wound of the castrated woman, had meanwhile grown large. As Don Juan approaches the light it turns from red to white, and at the end of the constricting passageway a startled bird tears 'through the veil of vagueness which dimmed the outer light' revealing 'a stream of dazzling light' (115). For



Don Juan it was as if ‘a curtain had suddenly been drawn’ and he issues, ‘blind and dizzy, into the outer world’ which he sees through ‘singed’ eyelids (115-16). Unveiled, the wound it seems leads to blindness and, by association, figurative castration. The ‘outer world’ proves to be an inner courtyard. From the court Don Juan enters:

a series of arched and domed chambers, whose roofs [*sic*] were hung as with icicles of gold and silver, or incrustated [*sic*] with mother of pearl constellations which twinkled in the darkness, while the walls shone with patterns that seemed carved of ivory and pearl and beryl and amethyst where the sunbeams grazed them, or imitated some strange sea caves, filled with flitting colours, where the shadow rose fuller and higher (118).

The long passage that leads from these chambers to the Infanta are lined with ‘a row of sleeping eunuchs’ (118). The Infanta’s chamber is ‘a vast circular hall, so vast that you could not possibly see where it ended’ in which she is attended, again, by ‘rows and rows of white-robed eunuchs’, and where ‘innumerable voices of exquisite sweetness burst forth in strange wistful chants’ filling the hall ‘with sound, as it was already filled with light’ (119-20). The Infanta herself is ‘an unfinished statue’ (121), and doll-like in appearance recalling the Virgin of the Seven Daggers:

From her head there descended on either side of her person a diaphanous veil of shimmering colours, powdered over with minute glittering spangles. Her breast was covered with rows and rows of the largest pearls, a perfect network reaching from her slender throat to her waist, among which flashed diamonds embroidered in her vest. Her face was oval, with the silver pallor of the young moon; her mouth most subtly carmined, looked like a pomegranate flower among tuberoses, for her cheeks were painted white, and the orbits of her great long-fringed eyes

were stained violet (124).<sup>139</sup>

Fuelled by desire, Don Juan begs the Infanta to 'Unveil and arise' that he might fix upon her alone 'his affections, more roving hitherto than those of Prince Galaor or of the many-shaped god Proteus' (122-23). The Infanta unveils, and raises 'her heavy eyelids, stained violet with henna' fixing upon Don Juan 'a glance long, dark and deep, like that of the wild antelope' (128), and accepts his love only on the condition that he renounces his love for the Virgin of the Seven Daggers. Don Juan refuses to deny his devotion to the latter and as he does so the Infanta and the Virgin merge in his imagination:

The place seemed to swim about Don Juan. Before his eyes rose the throne, all vacillating in its splendour, and on the throne the Moorish Infanta with the triangular patterns painted on her tuberoso cheeks, and the long look in her henna'd eyes; and the image of her was blurred, and imperceptibly it seemed to turn into the effigy, black and white in her stiff puce frock and seed-pearl stomacher, of the Virgin of the Seven Daggers (128-29).

Despite his request for the Virgin's protection, Don Juan is beheaded by the Infanta's chief eunuch. But Don Juan's spirit continues to roam the streets of Grenada unaware of his death until he is confronted with his own decapitated body. The tale ends with Don Juan's successful plea for the Madonna's mediation. Although he dies unshriven with the full weight of his sins on his now headless shoulders, he appears to rise as if to heaven in full sight of the Madonna's benevolent eyes.

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<sup>139</sup> The Infanta's 'carmined' mouth resembling a 'pomegranate flower' links her to those 'blossom-mouthed women' and vampiric lesbians that seem to haunt *Miss Brown*. Moreover, the association of the Infanta's mouth with the pomegranate, aligns her with Dionysian excess, (for the plant is said to have sprung from the blood of Dionysus), and with the Great Goddesses of fertility. However, the fruit and the mouth also recall 'wound' images which represent castration. See Ad de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols* (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1974), p. 371.



Lee's Infanta, covered in 'a diaphanous veil of shimmering colours', displaying 'subtly carmined' lips, and eyes 'stained violet with henna' recalls H.D.'s Sappho, drenched in tints of 'rich colour' which stain 'cloth and flesh and parchment'.<sup>140</sup> At this moment of dangerous lesbian identification, Lee's character, Don Juan, conflates the image presented by the Infanta with the 'purifying' image of the Virgin of the Seven Daggers. Yet the conflation contaminates the latter, and the Infanta's domain with its fountains and strange, jewel-encrusted 'sea-caves' glinting with mother-of pearl, displays features which are themselves associated with Marian images that harbour erotic implications. Referring to Mariological symbols evident in medieval and Renaissance texts, Ruth Vanita writes that 'Carol Falvo Heffernan has elaborated on the erotic connotations of images such as the garden, the fountain, the sun, and the singing phoenix' and tells us that these images are often accompanied by 'those of flowers like the rose, the violet, the lily, of birds, ... and of gems, especially the pearl in the oyster' - the pearl suggesting 'both the child in the womb and the clitoris in the vulva' - in Mariological texts and paintings.<sup>141</sup> Moreover, these symbols appear in writings of same-sex desire such as H.D.'s 'The Wise Sappho' in which, Vanita argues, 'rose, violet, lily, star, moon, jewel, shell, purple' are engaged 'to imagine Sappho and her world', and also occur in 'Notes on Thought and Vision', although here the central image is that of 'oyster and pearl'.<sup>142</sup> Living in an underground paradise reminiscent of Vathek's Halls of Eblis, surrounded by images of 'maternal' caves and passages which are watered by fountains, that, for Vanita, function as 'a major image of love between women', Lee's Infanta, for all her apparent youth, becomes an

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<sup>140</sup> Gregory, p. 106.

<sup>141</sup> Vanita, pp. 50-51.

<sup>142</sup> Vanita, n. 35, p. 255.

underground version of Pater's *La Gioconda*.<sup>143</sup> Her enigmatic beauty seems like that of Pater's Mona Lisa, 'wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions'.<sup>144</sup> Her eyelids are also 'a little weary' and she appears to contain mysteries beyond her years, to be 'older than the rocks among which she sits', to have been 'a diver in deep seas', and 'like the vampire ... dead many times', having 'learned the secrets of the grave'.<sup>145</sup> The resemblance between Lee's Infanta and Pater's *La Gioconda* adds new significance to the conflation of the Infanta and the Virgin of the Seven Daggers in Lee's text for between them they create a nexus of female images in which mother is indistinguishable from daughter. The animation of the Infanta, 'an unfinished statue', aligns her with Helen of Troy that 'semi-vivified statue' who in Lee's *Belcaro* is, as we have seen in the previous chapter, herself associated with the doll. Yet, in her affinity with Pater's *La Gioconda*, who, for Freud, 'is the transformation of the image of the desired mother', the Infanta is also 'Leda',

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<sup>143</sup> William Beckford, *Vathek*, originally published in French in 1786 in which the halls of Eblis, and the decadent opulence of their innumerable womb-like chambers are described; Vanita, p. 60. Vanita argues that fountains function in this manner in works by homosexual writers such as Michael Field and Virginia Woolf. Interestingly, this image occurs in the erotic mermaids who spout water from their breasts and grace the gardens in which Maddalena is buried in Lee's 'A Wedding Chest'.

<sup>144</sup> Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 80.

<sup>145</sup> Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 80. In her discussion of Pater's *La Gioconda*, Vanita observes that the vampire is linked to female homosexuality by Lillian Faderman who argues that from the advent of Coleridge's 'Christabel' in which Geraldine, the older woman, becomes lover and 'mother' to Christabel, vampirism has been linked with lesbianism and, as we have seen, this model is used in relation to Lee both indirectly by Lee herself in *Miss Brown*, and by Bertrand Russell (see also, Paglia, Ch. 12). Vanita suggests that the image of Mona Lisa as 'a diver in deep seas' is also homoerotic, and occurs in the works of Oscar Wilde in the figures of Narcissus and Charmides, and in the marine imagery prevalent in lesbian poems such as Renée Vivien's 'Undine' (p. 66). Given the recurrence of the pearl and oyster image, and marine metaphors in lesbian texts, it is unsurprising that the term 'pearl diver' is associated with lesbianism and appropriated by lesbian criticism, see *Volcanoes and Pearl Divers: Essays in Lesbian Feminist Studies*, ed. by Suzanne Raitt (London: Onlywoman Press, 1995), which 'celebrates lesbian culture both past and present' (p. viii). Interestingly, Susan Navarette notes that Lee herself was to describe the Spanish-style Madonna as the 'fair dame in the velvet embroidered gown, with the long, hanging hair'; the sister of 'that silly sentimental coquette, the Monna Lisa [*sic*] of Leonardo' (quoted in Navarette, p. 168): a doubling which, I claim, sheds new light on the Virgin in Lee's tale.



Helen's mother, and as St Anne, the Virgin's mother.<sup>146</sup> These relationships echo the mother/daughter model of the women in Lee's tale for the Infanta is, literally speaking, an 'infant' and the Virgin is the universal mother: a model which in 'Pater's mythmaking ... is the type of love and desire between women'.<sup>147</sup> What is particularly interesting about this relationship is that as their images coalesce, the mother/child roles become indistinct, once again recalling traditional models of lesbian love and pre-Oedipal fusion. Moreover, the homoerotic connotations of the Infanta (the Virgin's subterranean double) are figured not only in the *poikilos* phenomenon - the 'opalescent radiance', the 'glittering spangles' and flashing diamonds, that veil her and echo the 'shimmering colours' worn by the Virgin - but also in the very language that describes her for the words, 'exquisite', 'strange', 'subtly', 'mysterious' that surround both the Infanta and the Virgin, are akin to those which, in Pater's work, appear to encode homoeroticism.<sup>148</sup>

Significantly, the words used by a young Vernon Lee and John Singer Sargent to describe a portrait of the castrato Farinelli in the Accademia Filarmonica in Bologna are similar in tone and implication. Farinelli, if we recall, is perceived as 'mysterious, uncanny, a wizard, serpent, sphinx; strange, weird, *curious*' and, interestingly, castration haunts Lee's tale 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers' and manifests itself both literally, in the eunuchs that protect the Infanta, and figuratively in Don Juan's decapitation.<sup>149</sup> The Infanta's eunuchs are subtly doubled in 'Syphax, His Majesty's own soprano singer' (100) whose voice can be heard in the church of the Virgin of the Seven Daggers both as Don Juan initially begs for the Virgin's protection, and as he rises to meet her after her

<sup>146</sup> Quoted in Gregory, p. 104; Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 80.

<sup>147</sup> *Vanita*, p. 68.

<sup>148</sup> *Vanita*, p. 66.

<sup>149</sup> Lee, introduction to *For Maurice*, p. xxx.

seemingly successful intercession at the end of the tale. Although not explicitly stated, it is evident that Syphax is a castrato, for the period in which Lee's tale is set, 'two hundred ago' in the reign of 'Charles the Melancholy' (98) recalls that of Philip V of Spain who reigned from 1700-1746 and suffered from melancholia which was assuaged by Farinelli's dulcet tones.<sup>150</sup> Given the 'exquisite sweetness' of the voices heard in the Infanta's domain it is likely that they emanate from Syphax's counterparts: the white-robed eunuchs who protect her. The presence of the castrato in Lee's tale is, I would claim, significant and represents castration both physically and psychoanalytically. In Chapter One we encountered the connection between the castrato and the Medusa via the gorgonian cry, yet, for Freud, there is also a psychic link between them in that Medusa functions as a significant psychoanalytical model of castration. In Freud's essay 'Medusa's Head', Medusa's decapitated head is figured as a 'genitalized head' in which the mouth represents a vagina dentata, and her snakes stand for pubic hair so that when a man unveils the Medusa he confronts 'the dread of looking at the female sexual organs', culminating in Freud's formulation and analysis:<sup>151</sup>

To decapitate: to castrate. The terror of the Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. Numerous analyses have made us familiar with the occasion for this: it occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Philip's wife, hearing Farinelli sing at Naples, invited the castrato to the Spanish court where he became extremely influential. See Angus Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1956), pp. 99-101.

<sup>151</sup> Froma Zeitlin, quoted in Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, p. 145; Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, p. 145.

<sup>152</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Medusa's Head', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols, trans. and ed. James Strachey, Anna Freud and others, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), XVIII, pp. 273-74, (p. 273).



The unveiled Infanta, who lives in a threatening maternal space inhabited by snakes and eunuchs, and is the dark double of that other Great Mother, the Virgin, reveals a castrative power which is, like Medusa's, centred in her gaze, for it is her glance, 'long, dark, and deep' (128) that causes Don Juan to link her to the Virgin of the Seven Daggers to whom he has pledged his loyalty: an act of faith that results ultimately in his decapitation.<sup>153</sup> At this point in the tale, Don Juan effectively becomes a 'castrato': Syphax's ghostly counterpart. Although Don Juan's dismemberment occurs towards the end of Lee's tale, his decapitation is prefigured much earlier. When Don Juan springs from his bed, (presumably the site of amorous conquests), we learn that that it is 'curtained with dull, blood-coloured damask' (103). Paintings of his ancestors show them 'with their foot on a Moor's decollated head, much resembling a hairdresser's block' (106).<sup>154</sup> As the sun sets over the Sierra, it leaves 'a trail of blood' (foreshadowing the trail Don Juan himself will leave in due course), that turns 'the snows of Mulhacen a livid, bluish blood-red, and [leaves] all along the lower slopes of the Sierra wicked russet stains, as of the rust of blood upon marble' (106). Given the existing links between the castrato and Christ, one might also argue that the images of 'waxen Christs with bloody wounds and spangled loin-cloths' serve as doubles of those marked and naked women, like Maddalena, thus further blurring the boundaries of gender in Lee's tale and linking the castrato to the 'castrated' female body. It would seem that, here, as in 'A Wedding Chest', the three

<sup>153</sup> In her essay 'The Adolescent Boy: Fin de Siècle Femme Fatale?', Martha Vicinus points out that in lesbian literature the snake appears repeatedly 'as positive signs, as if to overturn Eve's sin' (p. 102) and argues that both Lee and Renée Vivien (in *A Woman Appeared to Me* (1904)), see the snake-temptress of Genesis as 'an embodiment of women's power' (p. 102).

<sup>154</sup> This image of decapitation, i.e. the 'hairdresser's block' also appears in 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' where the young Alberic mistakes a barber's block with a wig on it for 'his grandfather's head, stuck on a short pole in the light of a window' (see *Pope Jacynth*, p. 35). This image also functions as an interesting precursor to that of the decapitated Moor which appears on the opening page of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), especially in view of the fact that Woolf was well-acquainted with Lee and her works.

main characters in Lee's tale, Don Juan, the Virgin, and the Infanta, function as facets of Lee which coalesce via unexpected identifications. The Infanta, with her Medusa-like stare and Sapphic colours, represents a dangerous lesbian eroticism. She is the female love-object that is sanctioned in the tale via Don Juan's heterosexual desire. Yet, interestingly, Don Juan, a famous lover of women, is symbolically castrated, and now inhabits an androgynous body that is neither man nor woman. His heterosexual desire for the Infanta is therefore complicated and arguably becomes homoeroticized. In the tale, Don Juan rejects the dangerous engagement with the Infanta's body, in favour of an idealized, and spiritualized love for the Virgin. Yet, as we have seen, the Virgin's purity is compromised when she blurs into the Infanta in Don Juan's perception. As a result, she, too, becomes Medusa-like, a figure 'charged with a profound sensuality and physicality that cannot be purged from her matriarchal origins'.<sup>155</sup> Moreover, the end to Lee's tale, an ending which seemingly stages Don Juan's ascension to Heaven, is laden with images that suggest a return to the maternal womb:

The cupola began to rise and expand; the painted clouds to move and blush a deeper pink; the painted sky to recede and turn into deep holes of real blue ... [and] the gold transparency at the top of the dome expanded; its rays grew redder and redder and more golden' (138-39).

At its centre is the Virgin of the Seven Daggers, her maternal eyes 'fixed mildly upon him' as she accepts him. The description given here resonates with images of the Infanta's womb-like domain for here, as there, the place is filled 'with [the] sounds of exquisitely

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<sup>155</sup> Susan R. Bowers, 'Medusa and the Female Gaze', *National Women's Studies Association Journal*, 2 (1990), 217-235, (p. 219).



played lutes and viols, and voices, among which he distinctly recognized Syphax, His Majesty's chief soprano' (138). It seems that it is Don Juan the 'castrato' who finally enters the desired female body, and, interestingly, it is the now 'asexual' Don Juan who is to remain there in eternal pre-Oedipal fusion with the mother.

Unlike Lee's tales of animated statues in which desire is contained in the statue itself, Lee's 'doll' stories appear to explore fantasies of desire experienced from different sexual viewpoints. In 'A Wedding Chest', Troilo, with his boyish features that, Vicinus would argue, link him with lesbian desire, kills Maddalena which, if we consider the association between the corpse and the doll traced earlier, effectively makes her body doll-like; her dangerous allure controlled but implicit in the bloody marks that stain her skin. Desiderio's love for Maddalena suggests an idealized heterosexual desire, yet for all Lee's attempts at 'purifying' the object of that desire, Desiderio's introjection of Troilo undermines that purification and returns us, once again, to the homosexual eroticism of the Troilo-Maddalena duo. Moreover, the name 'Desiderio', meaning literally 'a desire', implies that the complex interactions between the three characters in the tale are expressive of same-sex desire mediated via their male and female bodies.<sup>156</sup> In 'Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child', the desire for the mother, and the desire to be the child loved by her, is negotiated via a fluidity of identity that allows an oscillation between the two relationships and these shifts of identification are also discernible in 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers' which, though ostensibly presenting a tale of heterosexual desire and devotion, as I would argue, implicitly homoerotic. In these tales, as in those discussed in previous chapters, the supernatural functions as a 'potential space' in which sexual

<sup>156</sup> The Italian word 'desiderio' is defined as a 'desire' or 'longing'; a 'longed-for thing or person' See the *Cambridge Italian Dictionary*, Italian-English (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962).

identity is negotiated and sexual desire for the female body is fulfilled through a regression to that pre-Oedipal space which sanctions and simultaneously purifies the desire for the maternal body. These tales suggest the particularly complicated nature of female same-sex desire in which identities are unavoidably conflated, and in which, traditionally, the roles of mother and child are perceived as interchangeable. In order to highlight the complexity of Lee's negotiation of identity within this framework, it is worth looking at the figure of the doll as it occurs in the writings of two male writers, E. T. A. Hoffmann and Tommaso Landolfi, in Hoffmann's now famous tale, 'The Sandman' (1816), and Landolfi's 'Gogol's Wife' (1954).<sup>157</sup>

### **'The Sandman'**

Hoffmann's tale centres on Nathaniel, a university student of a nervous disposition whose chance encounter with Giuseppe Coppola, a dealer in barometers and optical instruments, triggers memories of a childhood trauma. For Nathaniel, Coppola is the double of Coppelius, an aged advocate who regularly visited Nathaniel's home and conducted strange and secret experiments in partnership with his father, and who was implicated in the latter's death. In Nathaniel's young mind Coppelius became the sandman who throws handfuls of sand in children's eyes, 'so that they jump out of their heads all bloody', for his visits were always accompanied by his mother's urgent words, 'Now children, to bed, to bed! The sandman is coming' (86-87). Nathaniel's fear of

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<sup>157</sup> E. T. A. Hoffmann, 'The Sandman' in *Tales of Hoffmann*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale and others (London: Penguin, 1982), pp. 85-125, and Tommaso Landolfi, 'Gogol's Wife' in *Gogol's Wife and Other Stories*, trans. by Raymond Rosenthal and others (New York: New Directions, 1963), pp. 1-16. All subsequent references to each of these tales are given in the text.



Coppola leads to illness and he returns home, to his mother and to his fiancée, Clara, to recover. Yet his anxieties persist, manifesting themselves in stories and poems in one of which Coppelius appears and touches Clara's eyes, 'which sprang out like blood-red sparks, singeing and burning, on to Nathaniel's breast', and throws Nathaniel into a circle of fire from which he hears Clara's voice saying, 'Do you not see me? ... I still have my eyes; you have only to look at me!', but when he looks into Clara's eyes, what he sees is death gazing mildly out of them (105). Eventually, seemingly well again, Nathaniel returns to lodgings in the university town, situated opposite the Professor Spalanzani's home, from which he observes Spalanzani's daughter, Olympia, whom he has seen briefly once before, and who sits 'for hours on end ... in the same posture' and gazes at him 'with an unmoving stare' (108-09). Still in love with Clara, Nathaniel resists the beautiful Olympia's charms, only now and then glancing 'fleetingly over his book across to the beautiful statue' (109). During this period, Coppola reappears. Coppola is merely trying to sell Nathaniel some glasses which he calls 'occe' in his native Piedmontese, but Nathaniel misinterprets the word 'occe' as 'eyes' causing his fears to resurface and Coppola and Coppelius blur once more in Nathaniel's imagination. In order to placate Coppola, Nathaniel purchases a pocket-telescope which he uses to take a closer look at Olympia. Beholding Olympia's beauty clearly for the first time, Nathaniel is enthralled and henceforth Olympia replaces Clara in his affections. Nathaniel finally meets her officially at a ball where they dance together and as they do so the previously motionless Olympia is seemingly animated by Nathaniel's desire:

Olympia's hand was icy cold; he felt a coldness as of death thrill through him; he looked into Olympia's eyes, which gazed back at him full of love and desire; and at that instant it seemed as though a pulse began to beat in the cold hand and a stream of life blood began to glow (113-14).

Despite the fact that fellow students judge Olympia to be 'a wax-faced wooden doll' who is 'rigid and soulless', who plays and sings with the 'regularity of a machine', Nathaniel is totally smitten (116). He visits her regularly and reads her his creative works to which she listens with apparent rapture and to Nathaniel it seems that what Olympia said of his work, 'of his poetic talent in general, came from the depths of his own being, that her voice was indeed the voice of those very depths themselves' (118). However, Nathaniel's happiness is shortlived for he soon discovers the awful truth, that Olympia is a doll, an automaton constructed by Spalanzani and Coppola: the latter supplying the clockwork mechanism and, more importantly, her eyes. One fateful day Nathaniel witnesses Spalanzani and Coppola struggling for possession of Olympia, and Coppola finally leaves the former's home with the doll trailing lifelessly over his shoulder. Nathaniel catches sight of her now mangled body, and a hideous sight is revealed for 'Olympia's deathly-white face possessed no eyes: where the eyes should have been, there were only pits of blackness' (119-20). The discovery triggers Nathaniel's insanity and it is only much later, after careful tending from 'his mother, his loved ones and his friends' that he recovers (122). But, once again, his recovery is only temporary for, on a visit to town, Nathaniel and Clara climb the town hall tower where he takes out Coppola's pocket-telescope for a better view, and he looks through the glass only to see Clara standing before it. The parallel drawn between Clara and Olympia is fatal and he



tries to throw Clara from the tower. Clara is saved but for Nathaniel there is no relief and he hurls himself to the ground.

### **‘Gogol’s Wife’**

Landolfi’s tale is narrated by Foma Paskalovitch, the biographer of the ‘genius’ Nikolai Vassilevitch Gogol, and tells the story of his ‘wife’, Caracas, who ‘was not a woman. Nor was she any sort of human being, nor any sort of living creature at all, whether animal or vegetable ... She was quite simply a balloon’ (2). Her unusual construction seemingly allows her to change her appearance at will:

She could sometimes appear to be thin, ... and at other times to be excessively well-endowed ... And she often changed the color of her hair, both on her head and elsewhere on her body, though not necessarily at the same time ... She could even to a certain extent change the very color of her skin (3).

Her enviable control over her appearance is soon belied, however, for we learn that the cause of these changes ‘was nothing else but the will of Nikolai Vassilevitch himself’ (3). He would ‘inflate her to a greater or lesser degree, would change her wig and her other tufts of hair, and would grease her with ointments and touch her up in various ways so as to obtain more or less the type of woman which suited him at that moment’ (3-4).

According to the narrator, Caracas is anatomically correct in every detail, constructed around a rudimentary skeleton with ‘every smallest attribute of her sex properly disposed in the proper location’ (5):

Particularly worthy of attention were her genital organs (if the adjective is permissible in such a context). They were formed by means of ingenious folds in the rubber. Nothing was forgotten, and their operation was rendered easy by various devices, as well as by the internal pressure of the air (5).

In addition, Caracas's mouth was adorned by 'splendid rows of white teeth' and she had 'dark eyes which, in spite of their immobility, perfectly simulated life' (6). The narrator hears her voice but once when, 'with a husky voice, like Venus on the nuptial couch, she said point-blank: "I want to go poo poo"' (7). Gogol's response is to deflate her rapidly and to explain to his visitor, ' "She only does it for a joke, or to annoy me, because as a matter of fact she does not have such needs"' (7). The narrator traces the trajectory of Gogol's relationship with his 'wife'. We learn that in the early years, she and Gogol had been happy but that the relationship began to deteriorate as Caracas 'began to show signs of independence or, as one might say, of autonomy' (8). Disturbingly, Gogol 'had the extraordinary impression that she was acquiring a personality of her own', a personality which manifests itself even in the assumption of a particular identity for, 'between all those brunettes, those blondes, those redheads ... those plump, those slim, those dusky or snowy or golden beauties, there was a certain something in common' (8-9). As time goes on, Caracas becomes not only 'a disturbing presence' but 'a hostile one' (9). This gradual development into an organic being brings its own problems: Caracas falls ill with syphilis, '- or rather Gogol did - though he was not then having, nor had he ever had, any contact with other women' (9), from which Gogol infers that ' "what lay at the heart of Caracas ... was the spirit of syphilis"' : a disease that, in Caracas, 'did not seem to be easily curable' (9-10). As the years go by, Gogol's love for Caracas remains unabated, but he



cannot hide his distaste for her, as Paskalovitch explains:

Toward the end, aversion and attachment struggled so fiercely with each other in his heart that he became quite stricken, almost broken up. His restless eyes, ... now almost always shone with a fevered light, ... The strangest impulses arose in him, accompanied by the most senseless fears. He spoke to me of Caracas more and more often, accusing her of unthinkable and amazing things (10).

These ‘amazing things’ include aging and ‘giving herself up to solitary pleasures, which he had expressly forbidden’ (11). While Paskalovitch cannot comment on the truth of these accusations, he asserts that Caracas, nevertheless, had ‘turned into a bitter creature, querulous, hypocritical and subject to religious excess’ (11). One night, fuelled by pressures, and possibly drug abuse, Gogol decides on Caracas’s destruction which is witnessed by the dismayed Paskalovitch. Inserting a tube into her anus, Gogol begins to inflate her and continues to do so until she bursts, throwing the scattered pieces onto the fire to burn. Having done so, Gogol appears to recall something he has forgotten to do and leaves the room. When he returns, he asks Paskalovitch to promise not to look as he enters. Paskalovitch promises, and Gogol runs to the fireplace carrying something in his arms which he also throws on the fire. Despite his promise, Paskalovitch turns in time to glimpse this action, in time to see that what Gogol had carried in his arms ‘was a baby. Not a flesh and blood baby, of course, but more something in the line of a rubber doll or a model. Something, which, to judge by its appearance, could have been called *Caracas’ son*’ (16).

## Guys and Dolls

What characterizes these tales and separates them from those of Lee's I have discussed so far, is that in each case, the doll is destroyed. In contrast to the dismembered doll-remains that physically litter the stories of Hoffmann and Landolfi, Lee's dolls do not suffer a parallel fate: Maddalena's doll-like body remains intact, Sister Benvenuta becomes a divine 'doll-statue' in a tableau of religious union, and Don Juan's Virgin doll retains her immaculate perfection. However, the question one must ask is why? In Landolfi's tale, as in Hoffmann's, the anxieties surrounding the doll centre on autonomy. While Olympia murmurs an appreciatory, 'orgasmic', yet empty, 'Ah, Ah, Ah' in response to Nathaniel, she is a 'beam of light from the Promised Land of love', a 'heart' in which his 'whole being is reflected' (114). Similarly, while Caracas fulfils all Gogol's fantasies with silent and seemingly, responsive, acceptance she is the focus of his unconditional love. In other words, as long as these dolls perform the role of the Romantic epipsyche propounded in Shelley's 'On Love' (1828), being that 'soul within our soul,' that 'mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness', they can be sure of their suitors' undying loyalty and affection.<sup>158</sup> In Hoffmann's text, contemporaneous with Shelley's 'Alastor' (1816), Olympia, arguably represents a prosaic alternative to the veiled maid of Alastor's poetic vision whose 'voice was like the voice of his own soul'.<sup>159</sup> Gogol's wife is to begin with similarly undemanding for 'no

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<sup>158</sup> Shelley, 'On Love', p. 474.

<sup>159</sup> Shelley, 'Alastor', in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, pp. 70-87, (p. 74).



companion could be quieter or less importunate than she' (8).<sup>160</sup> For each man the doll is an epipsychic figure which Maxwell describes as a 'device that completes [his] ... lack, simultaneously reflecting him back to himself in a reassuring fullness': a function which was once fulfilled for them by the mother for, as Winnicott argues, when a baby looks at its mother's face, 'ordinarily what the baby sees is himself or herself'.<sup>161</sup> Winnicott goes on to point out, however, that some babies have a long experience of not getting back what they are giving: they look and they do not see themselves'.<sup>162</sup> In denying the reality of Nathaniel's anxieties concerning the sandman, Clara would seem to function as a 'mirror' in which he cannot see himself reflected for her thoughts are different from his own. Similarly, once Caracas develops a sense of independence, even going so far as to insist on needs with which she has not been programmed, she can no longer function as Gogol's reassuring double. It is woman, then, or more especially, the mother, who is the cause of anxiety. Without the mother's reassuring look, the child's 'creative capacity begins to atrophy', and it looks around 'for other ways of getting something of [itself] back from the environment'.<sup>163</sup> Interestingly, in Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' we actually encounter Nathaniel's mother who also denies the sandman's existence, as Clara does later. In denying Nathaniel's fears, it would seem that she, like Clara, does not function as a suitable 'mirror'. Although in 'Gogol's Wife' we do not meet Gogol's mother we can only assume that she is the fundamental source of the anxieties which are later triggered

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<sup>160</sup> Kitty Carriker also notes this doubling between Gogol and Caracas in *Gogol's Wife*. See *Created in Our Image: The Miniature Body of the Doll as Subject and Object* (London: Associated University Presses, 1998), p. 105.

<sup>161</sup> Catherine Maxwell, 'Browning's Pygmalion and the Revenge of Galatea', *English Literary History*, 60 (1993), 989-1013, p. 989; Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 112.

<sup>162</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 112.

<sup>163</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 112.

by Caracas for, as we learn, apparently, he has had no other contact with women save that with Caracas herself. Yet, in order to reflect reassuringly, the doll must show signs of animation and, significantly, in Olympia and Caracas, it is the eye that creates this illusion. When Nathaniel looks into Olympia's eyes, they 'gazed back at him full of love and desire' and 'at that instant it seemed as though a pulse began to beat in the cold hand and stream of life blood began to glow' (114), and from Paskalovitch we learn that it is Caracas' eyes which 'perfectly simulated life' (6). The association between the doll and the eye as centres of reflection is perhaps less perverse than it might initially seem for in dialogue with Plato's Alcibiades, Socrates observes that:

the face of the person who looks into another's eye is shown in the optic confronting him, as in a mirror, and we call this the pupil, for in a sort it is an image of the person looking ... Then an eye viewing another eye, and looking at the most perfect part of it, the thing wherewith it sees, will thus see itself.<sup>164</sup>

Plato's text includes an explanatory footnote for the word 'pupil' which stems from the Greek word, *κόρη* (kore), and the Latin word, *pupilla*, both of which are defined as 'little girl' or 'doll'.<sup>165</sup> It is the eye, then, or more specifically the pupil, that functions as the mirror. Yet eyes, as we have seen, can themselves be a source of anxiety and are particularly so for Nathaniel in 'The Sandman'.<sup>166</sup> From Freud's analysis of 'The

<sup>164</sup> Plato, *Charmides, Alcibiades 1&2, Hipparchus, The Lovers, Theages, Minos, Epinomis*, ed. by E. Capps and others, trans. by W. R. M. Lamb (London: Heinemann, 1927), pp. 210-211.

<sup>165</sup> Plato, *Charmides*, n. 1, pp. 210-11.

<sup>166</sup> Interestingly, Kitty Carriker observes that in Hoffmann's 'Automata', Ferdinand's friend, Lewis, expresses fears regarding automata that centre on the eyes: 'It is their "staring, lifeless, glassy eyes" that impart the "horrible, eerie, shuddery feeling" that these creatures/creations evoke in him; and he traces his anathema to a waxwork exhibit that he was taken to as a child. From that time forward, he says, "All figures of this sort ... which can scarcely be said to counterfeit humanity so much as to travesty it - mere images of living death or inanimate life - are most distasteful to me" ' (p. 52).



Sandman' in his essay 'The "Uncanny"', we learn that eyes, and particularly the fear of losing one's sight, are a source of castration-anxiety linked to the boy's first sight of the mother's 'wounded' genitals. But why should the sight of the mother's genitals be equated with blindness? One possible answer may lie in a desire for blindness that the disturbing vision might remain unseen. Yet blindness itself, especially as it occurs in 'The Sandman' where eyes are torn from their sockets, evokes an image of redundant hollows which echo the 'wound' that marks the 'castrated' Freudian female body. It is also important to remember that the 'pupils' (or 'dolls'), in which Nathaniel and Gogol see their self-images, are also literally holes, voids that mirror the maternal fissure. If this is the case then the dolls Olympia and Caracas cannot be divorced from a connection with lack or castration. Nathaniel's first encounter with Olympia is particularly telling:

Recently I went upstairs in Professor Spalanzani's house and perceived that a curtain which was always drawn tight across a glass door up there was showing a chink of light ... A woman, tall, very slim, perfectly proportioned and gorgeously dressed, sat in the room at a little table, with her arms lying upon it and her hands folded ... She seemed not to notice me, and her eyes had in general something fixed and staring about them, I could almost say she was sightless, as if she was sleeping with her eyes open (98-99).

In this moment of unveiling what is revealed is a 'sightless' figure and what is disclosed to Nathaniel is a figuratively 'castrated' woman, a double to Lee's 'sightless and speechless' doll. The experience makes him 'feel quite uncanny' (99) suggesting an awareness of his anxiety. In 'Gogol's Wife', the fissure in Caracas's eyes is mirrored by a physical 'vaginal' fissure that becomes the site/sight of Gogol's anxieties for, despite being

apparently impossible, Caracas 'contracts' syphilis, which she 'transmits' to Gogol, effectively resulting in a disabling 'castration'. In 'The Sandman', woman and doll are conflated. Clara's rejection of Nathaniel's work results in his declaring her a 'lifeless accursed automaton' (106), his fragile ego demanding that Clara become the doll and Olympia the real woman, and earlier references to Clara as 'cold' and 'unfeeling' imply that she and Olympia are doubles. In 'Gogol's Wife', Caracas' ability to transform, or be transformed into an endless variety of female 'types', constructs her as 'everywoman', whilst inevitably presenting her as a male fantasy, thus forcing her to occupy an uneasy position between woman and doll. However, around the figures of the doll and the woman lurks the shadow of the mother and the threat of castration that is present in one is evidently still present in each of the others. Certainly Nathaniel's tale, in which Clara's eyes are gouged by Coppelius, prefigures the episode in which he discovers the eyeless Olympia. In Nathaniel's story Clara tells him, 'I still have my eyes; you have only to look at me!' but when Nathaniel looks into her eyes he sees only 'death' gazing mildly out of them (105).<sup>167</sup> That Nathaniel perceives Clara as a threat is expressed in his fiction and manifests itself in the madness that later overwhelms him when he discovers the corresponding 'pits of blackness' (120) that exist where Olympia's eyes once were: a discovery which recalls not only the anxiety of castration, but also the vaginal fissure of maternal engulfment. It would seem that, for Nathaniel, 'the openness of the mother ... the opening on to the mother' does indeed result in 'engulfment in illness, madness, and death'.<sup>168</sup> In 'Gogol's Wife', it is evidently when Caracas becomes an 'independent'

<sup>167</sup> The use of the word 'mildly' here recalls the look bestowed on Don Juan by the Virgin of the Seven Daggers whose eyes are 'fixed mildly' upon him as he rises to meet her at the end of the tale. I suggest that this parallel reinforces the threat that is implicit in both the doll and the woman.

<sup>168</sup> Irigaray, 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother', p. 40.



woman and a 'mother' that Gogol seeks her destruction. In giving birth, her vaginal fissure transforms into a reminder of the mother, forcing a confrontation with the castrative effects already experienced through syphilis. Faced with this threat, both men respond by attempting the destruction of the offending 'object'. As Clara blurs with Olympia before his very eyes, Nathaniel seeks her death and attempts to throw her from the tower. Similarly, Caracas, having borne a son and belied her doll-hood, must be 'dismembered' and thrown on the fire to burn. In contrast Lee, in whose tales 'castration' has positive benefits, permitting the negotiation of a lesbian identity and access to the body of the doll/woman/mother, Hoffmann and Landolfi exhibit an apparently 'traditional' male response to this threat: their dolls, Olympia and Caracas, are destroyed, enacting a literal destruction of the doll's body that is figuratively repeated in Freud's obliteration of the doll from the surface rhetoric of 'The "Uncanny" '. However, there is one tale by Lee in which the doll *is* destroyed although, as we shall see, for very different reasons from those of Hoffmann, Freud, and Landolfi.

### **'The Doll'**

The doll in question appears in a short story entitled simply *The Doll*, published in the collection, *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories*. Here, the doll is no longer hidden in the realms of the fantastic tale. The story, Lee claims in the introduction, was told to her by 'Pier Desiderio', a mutual friend of Lee's and Maurice Baring's, and in *Hortus Vitae: Essays on the Gardening of Life* (1904) Lee mentions an encounter with a doll which

seems to be the catalyst for her later tale.<sup>169</sup> According to Lee, however, this tale ‘is not by me at all, nor do I know whether it is by anybody, or, so to speak, a natural product’, but what *is* certain is that it was Lee who added ‘that little invented *finale* of the burning’.<sup>170</sup> Unusually for Lee, the first-person narrator is a woman, and the mention of a telegram situates the tale in a relatively modern, post mid-nineteenth-century setting rather than in some distant past. The narrator discovers the eponymous doll accidentally while visiting a seventeenth-century palace in Italy, a visit arranged by a curiosity dealer by the name of Orestes, and initially mistakes it for ‘a woman in 1820 [*sic*] costume’ (213). Dressed ‘to the utmost detail’ the doll wears ‘open-work silk stockings, with sandal shoes, and long silk embroidered mittens’ (214). On her second visit the narrator observes that, ‘The clothes which she wore were the real clothes of her poor dead original. And when I found on the table a dusty, unkempt wig, with straight bands in front and an elaborate jug handle of curls behind, I knew at once that it was made of the poor lady’s real hair’ (215-16).<sup>171</sup> We learn that the original had been the old Count’s wife who died only two years after her marriage. Subsequent to her death the Count had the doll made

<sup>169</sup> Vernon Lee, ‘The Blame of Portraits’, in *Hortus Vitae: Essays on the Gardening of Life*, (John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1904), pp. 139-47, (p. 144).

<sup>170</sup> Lee, introduction to *For Maurice*, pp. xlv, l.

<sup>171</sup> The appearance of these manufactured doll-women in tales by Lee and Landolfi has a macabre resonance with the doll created by the painter and writer, Oskar Kokoschka, who in 1919 commissioned a Stuttgart toy manufacturer to construct a lifesize doll for him. The doll was made from cloth and sawdust and was meant to be the effigy of Alma Mahler, his former mistress. Although it is uncertain whether Kokoschka wanted the doll as a sex-toy, he did instruct the manufacturer to make her with squeezable breasts and buttocks. Initially the doll was treated with what Tim Ashley calls ‘grotesque gallantry’: Kokoschka would take it for rides in his car and buy it dinner. However, this behaviour did not continue and the doll was destroyed in ‘a parade of ritualistic degradation. Kokoschka threw a drunken, torchlit party during the course of which “The Silent Woman”, as he called it, was first presented with a rival (in the form of a Venetian prostitute, or so he claimed) then decapitated as red wine was poured over its body.’ In later life, Kokoschka was to compare himself to Pygmalion, and Ashley suggests that Kokoschka, ‘prone to self-dramatization as he was’, had also consciously modelled his behaviour on Nathaniel in Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’. See Tim Ashley, ‘The Old Man and the Doll’, *Opera House: The Magazine of the Royal Ballet and the Royal Opera*, 10, (1999), 16-22, (p. 16).



for him 'from a picture' (214) and spent several hours with it every day. For the female narrator there is an immediate, if uneasy, bond with the doll:

I don't know what that Doll had done to me; but I found that I was thinking of her all day long. It was as if I had just made a new acquaintance of a painfully interesting kind, rushed into a sudden friendship with a woman whose secret I had surprised, as sometimes happens, by some mere accident. For I somehow knew everything about her, and the first items of information which I gained from Orestes ... did not enlighten me in the least, but merely confirmed what I was aware of (216-17).

She tells us that, married straight from the convent, the young Countess had been kept in isolation by a possessive husband 'so that she had remained a mere shy, proud, inexperienced child' (217). In Lee's tale, the doll, like the Infanta and the Virgin of the Seven Daggers, is composed of a nexus of female images. She is a work of art which is doll, sculpture and portrait simultaneously for she bears a 'Canova goddess or Ingres Madonna face' (216). She is arguably both 'child' and 'mother' to her husband who, like Hoffmann's Nathaniel, and Landolfi's Gogol, 'knew nothing of the feelings of others and cared only to welter and dissolve in his own' (217). In all their years of marriage he never attempts to discover 'whether his idol might have a mind or character of her own' (218), and she is condemned to a silence which is merely repeated in death. Her counterpart, the doll, becoming increasingly superfluous during the Count's second marriage, is eventually discarded and forgotten in the Count's old age. For the narrator, however, the doll is not so easily forgotten. 'Couldn't abandon the Doll' she writes, 'I couldn't leave her, with the hole in her poor cardboard head, with the Ingres Madonna features gathering dust in

that filthy old woman's ironing-room' (221). Enlisting Orestes' help, the narrator purchases the doll only to burn her. On her 'funeral' pyre, the doll seems to come alive momentarily:

Her fixed black eyes stared as in wonder on the yellow vines and reddening peach trees, the sparkling dewy grass of the vineyard, upon the blue morning sunshine, the misty blue amphitheatre of the mountains all round (223).

Her final gaze on the world is sweet but brief, for soon,

Orestes struck a match and slowly lit a pine cone with it; when the cone was blazing he handed it silently to me. The dry bay and myrtle blazed up crackling, with a fresh resinous odour; the Doll was veiled in flame and smoke. In a few seconds the flame sank, the smouldering faggots crumbled. The Doll was gone. Only where she had been, there remained in the embers something small and shiny. Orestes raked it out and handed it to me. It was a wedding ring of old-fashioned shape, which had been hidden under the silk mitten. 'Keep it signora,' said Orestes; 'you have put an end to her sorrows' (223).

The doll's role within the tale appears to have been much like that of Olympia and Caracas, functioning as a replacement both for the real woman, (the Countess), and for the mother in whose eyes the young Count would originally have seen himself reflected. Having never achieved a level of autonomy, the Countess, like the doll, is non-threatening and is therefore, once dead, reconstructed in full in her counterpart. In negotiating the Count's separation from his wife in death, the doll is arguably a 'funerary monument - a kind of mourning work - [which] undoes the bodily dissolution that is the work of



death'.<sup>172</sup> The doll, wearing the Countess's clothes, and her natural hair, is part auto-icon: an idol constructed of the very thing it represents. It is particularly significant that she wears the Countess's hair for, as Carol T. Christ observes,

Hair seems to be the feature of the dead body that ... [was] frequently used as a synecdoche for the intact corpse; indeed, as such, it often functions as a screen for the decaying body.<sup>173</sup>

Lee's doll, then, is related to Maddalena, to Julia, the Emperor's daughter, and, with her 'Ingres Madonna face' is undoubtedly linked to both Sister Benvenuta and the Virgin of the Seven Daggers. Yet, as Susan Navarette points out, she is also essentially a 'memento mori, a "reminder" of death', and it is perhaps because of this that she is relegated to limbo as the Count marries his new wife.<sup>174</sup> But on Lee's narrator she has a quite different effect. I would claim that what is particularly intriguing in her response to the doll, is the instinctive understanding she senses between herself and the doll. Ostensibly, this is perhaps because the doll epitomizes the still, silent, and subordinate position that characterized the expected position of women living in a patriarchal society, (no distinction being made between the portrait and the original), that she 'knows all about the doll's life ... because she has lived that life'.<sup>175</sup> However, it seems to me that this is too simplistic; that the nature of the narrator's identification with the doll is far more complex. I suggest that this complexity is implied in the language used to describe the narrator's affinity with the doll. After seeing the doll, she thinks of her 'all day long';

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<sup>172</sup> Carol T. Christ, 'Browning's Corpses', *Victorian Poetry* 33 (1995), 391-401, (p. 392).

<sup>173</sup> Christ, 'Browning's Corpses', p. 398.

<sup>174</sup> Navarette, p. 158.

<sup>175</sup> Navarette, p. 173.

their acquaintance is ‘of a painfully interesting kind’; the doll harbours a ‘secret’ which the narrator has instinctively understood, and she ‘somehow knew everything about her’ (216-17). The narrator’s response to the doll is characterized by an intensity that is normally reserved for the love-object of sexual desire. The ‘painfully interesting’ nature of their friendship which is based on the recognition of a ‘secret’, and particularly the doubling effect that results from this engagement, suggests the eroticism of same-sex desire for, as Irigaray argues, feminine desire ‘may be recovered only in secret, in hiding, with anxiety and guilt’, and as Kristeva has said, ‘passion between two women is one of the most intense figures of doubling’.<sup>176</sup> Given that the doll apparently allows the expression of a veiled homoerotic desire, why might Lee have added that ‘little invented *finale* of the burning’? The answer may lie in the figure of the doll itself which, as we have seen, often symbolizes the body of the mother. Whilst the engagement with the doll offers a return to a figurative womb and an asexual identity that sanctions the desire for, and fusion with the maternal body, it also posits the risk of engulfment recalling Kristeva’s model of a ‘deathly symbiosis with the mother’.<sup>177</sup> I suggest that the ritual burning of the doll in Lee’s tale allows an alternative means of asserting a fluid sexual identity whilst retaining a symbolic reference to same-sex desire. Susan J. Navarette notes that the doll’s funeral pyre is ignited with ‘the flaming pine cone sacred to Dionysus’, a detail which implies that the burning of the doll is ritualistic, and therefore, in some way, symbolic.<sup>178</sup> In my earlier discussion of ‘A Wedding Chest’, I claimed that the Dionysian rite suggested in Desiderio’s introjection of Troilo’s blood, allows him to

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<sup>176</sup> Navarette, p. 173; quoted in Weir, p. 86.

<sup>177</sup> Quoted in Weir, p. 86.

<sup>178</sup> Navarette, p. 171. This image of the Dionysian pyre also occurs in ‘Dionea’ which will be discussed in the next chapter.



transgress the boundaries of identity. I would argue that the burning of the doll functions in a similar way. It is not only the doll that is liberated by the blaze, but also Lee's narrator. As the doll lies on the funeral pyre she momentarily comes alive. Significantly, the doll, in this final instant, is no longer 'sightless': she 'sees' and 'enjoys'. In this brief moment of animation the doubling between the two women is arguably at its most intense. Yet the burning of one, appears to allow the release of the other into a separate and individual subjectivity, one that is, however, still imbued with a fluid sexual identity for, in accepting the doll's wedding ring, the narrator is both 'husband' and 'wife' to the doll. The doll, here, functions as a 'transitional object', symbolizing 'the union of the baby and the mother ... *at the point in time and space of the initiation of their state of separateness*'.<sup>179</sup> Yet, for Lee's narrator, that transition and separation entails the acceptance of an androgynous identity, one that is inevitably linked with the asexual identity of the pre-Oedipal child. For Lee, it would seem that the negotiation of a separate sexual identity always involves a return to the maternal body.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>180</sup> In his essay, 'Play, Creativity and Matricide: The Implications of Lawrence's "Smashed Doll" Episode', Daniel Dervin argues that when Paul destroys his sister's doll in *Sons and Lovers*, 'we ... see that in the process of one doll's destruction another "doll," namely Paul, hitherto the will-less follower and passive object ... comes alive and begin's consciously to act'. See *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 14 (1981), 81-94, (p. 85). In the light of this, if the narrator's identification with the doll centres (as Navarette suggests) on her own experience of submission and silence in a patriarchal culture, the destruction of the doll functions as a liberating assertion of autonomy. However, there are other implications suggested by the mode of destruction. If the doll and the narrator are 'doubles', (as I suggest), then the flames which destroy the former and serve to liberate the latter, are revitalising: the narrator/doll rises from the ashes like a phoenix, which, according to Vanita, is 'one of the most ubiquitous and recurrent images in homoerotic texts since Romanticism' and often 'identified with the narrating voice' (Vanita p. 239).

### Phallic Mothers: Pagan and Christian

But what kind of maternal body is represented by the dolls in Lee's tales? The defining link between these dolls is their affinity with the Virgin Mary. Maddalena's face is used in paintings of Our Lady, Benvenuta, who becomes a doll-like effigy at the end of the tale, is inevitably associated with the Virgin Mary, the image of the Infanta coalesces with that of the Virgin of the Seven Daggers, and the doll-Countess has an Ingres Madonna face. While I would suggest that one of the functions of these associations is the simultaneous authorization and 'purification' of same-sex desire, there appears to be another reason for this recurrent image. A clue lies in Lee's own discussion of the Virgin Mary in her introduction to *For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories*. For Lee, the Virgin Mary is intrinsically related to the Greek goddess Demeter and this connection offers interesting implications. In Jane Harrison's *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903), Harrison questions the ideality of Olympian religion and asserts 'through an analysis of specific festivals and cults, that Olympian religion is everywhere overlaid upon an older, precedent stratum of worship involving "snakes and ghosts and underworld beings"'.<sup>181</sup> Harrison also argues that 'patriarchal Olympian religion suppresses an earlier matriarchal religion and that vestiges of this earlier worship can be found in the iconography of extant artifacts'.<sup>182</sup> Relying on what Gregory calls, 'imaginal association', Harrison 'establishes a network of interrelated and recurring images from artifacts' which suggest 'the survival in memory and tradition of an archaic theology'.<sup>183</sup> One important example of this method is

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<sup>181</sup> Gregory, p. 112.

<sup>182</sup> Gregory, pp. 114-15.

<sup>183</sup> Gregory, p. 115.



illustrated by Gregory as she traces Harrison's argument concerning images of the Kourotrophos, or Great Goddess as child carrier:

The continual recurrence of a single image in metamorphic form suggests to Harrison increasingly diversified and distant strains of the old unitary and encompassing image. She presents a sequence of these primary images of the goddess from iconographical evidence: the prehellenic image of the Great Mother as the Lady of Wild Things, surrounded by fierce animals; the Kourotrophos; the dyad of Mother and Maid, or Kore; the image of the *anodos* of the Kore, a head emerging from the earth as from a womb, with attendant gods as midwives; the ubiquitous trinities of Korai in Greek cult, finally crystallizing in the goddesses of the 'Judgment of Paris,' Hera, Athene, and Aphrodite.<sup>184</sup>

According to Gregory, Harrison finds the

fullest echo of an original goddess in the figure of Aphrodite, who is also, like Persephone and Pandora, figured in terms of the *anodos*, the rising Kore. She is thus not only the *nymphē* or bride, but the virgin, and later, in connection with the Orphic cult of Eros, the mother as well.<sup>185</sup>

Gregory's concern is to draw parallels between H.D. and Jane Harrison, tracing in each 'an instinctive affiliation with the mother and with art and thus a rebelliousness toward Olympian rational totality, and at the same time a compulsive affiliation with Apollonian paternal authority'.<sup>186</sup> To H.D. and Jane Harrison we might easily add Vernon Lee in whose work we can see similar tensions. In fact, there may be a closer association to be

<sup>184</sup> Gregory, p. 115. The Mother and Maid dyad, symbolized by the Kore, resonates interestingly with the 'kore' or 'doll' referred to by Plato earlier in the chapter. It would seem that the doll's duality, and its ability to represent both mother and daughter is suggestive for Lee's use of the model in tales that have homoerotic subtexts.

<sup>185</sup> Gregory, p. 115.

<sup>186</sup> Gregory, p. 110.

traced between Harrison and Lee, than between Harrison and H.D. for whereas, 'H.D. never directly refers to Harrison in her writing', Lee had met Harrison in London and was to write on Harrison's work delivering a lecture entitled 'Sympathy versus Group Emotion, à propos of Miss Jane Harrison's *Alpha and Omega*' to the Cambridge 'Heretics' on June 6, 1915.<sup>187</sup> The latter is also known to have visited Walter Pater, Lee's friend and mentor, and her intellectual curiosity regarding Dionysiac cults would have been of interest to both Pater and Lee.<sup>188</sup> What is likely, if not certain, is that Lee would have found Harrison's work on matriarchal cults of particular interest for, if we employ Harrison's method of 'imaginal association' to those tales of Lee's I have discussed so far, it is possible to trace the significant presence of the Great Mother in her work. In previous chapters we have encountered Medusa, Athena, and Venus/Aphrodite, and in this chapter, Demeter, Proserpina, the Virgin Mary, and her dark double, the Medusa-like Infanta.<sup>189</sup> These powerful female images are versions of the 'phallic' mother, that 'primitive imago of early childhood located prior to the recognition of sexual difference', the mother 'whom the child perceives as complete and autonomous'.<sup>190</sup> The most

<sup>187</sup> Gregory, p. 110. For an account of Lee's acquaintance with Harrison, and her attack on Harrison's theory of art, see Mary Beard, *The Invention of Jane Harrison* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). Part of Lee's lecture on Harrison's work, originally entitled 'Harrison Unanimism Lecture': 'War, Group-Emotion and Art', exists in holograph manuscript in the Special Collections of Colby College Library. See Phyllis F. Mannocchi, '“Vernon Lee”: A Reintroduction and Primary Bibliography', *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920*, 26 (1983), 231-67. Although Lee may have disagreed with Harrison's conception of aesthetics, I would argue that her supernatural tales imply that she shared Harrison's interest in 'mother-cults'.

<sup>188</sup> In her essay, 'Greek Maenads, Victorian Spinsters', Yopie Prins informs us that Harrison refers to her meetings with Walter Pater in *Reminiscences*, in which she tells her readers that she found him to be a 'soft, kind cat' who 'purred so persuasively that I lost the sense of what he was saying'. See *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, pp. 44-81, (p. 61).

<sup>189</sup> When abducted, Maddalena is referred to as 'another Proserpina' (p. 124). The presence of 'Orestes' in *The Doll* also seems significant. Orestes, whose namesake killed his own mother and 'defeated and repressed' what Paglia calls 'the archaic night world' ruled by 'the Great Mother', here assists in the doll's liberation thus subverting traditional models of male engagement with the maternal body (p. 230).

<sup>190</sup> Francette Pacteau, 'The Impossible Referent: Representations of the Androgyne', in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. by Victor Burgin and others (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 62-84, (p. 71).



blatantly ‘phallic’ mother is the Virgin of the Seven Daggers, whose body is ‘cased like a knife in its sheath’, and pierced with seven swords, and whose image, as we have seen, can be traced in the other dolls that appear in Lee’s tales. For Catherine Clément, the figure of the Virgin Mary is ‘monstrous’, the ‘occultation of the feminine principle beneath the masculine ideal’.<sup>191</sup> She is ‘a man-made fantasy, the virilization of the woman, a means of oppression and alienation because emanating from a culture where the male principle dominates’.<sup>192</sup> Yet, as ‘phallic’ mother she is the source of female power. Although in reality the transition from a polymorphous infant sexuality, to an adult sexual identity entails surrendering ‘the belief in the “phallic” mother’, the realms of fantasy allow a regression to that belief, and provide a space within which ‘the *image* of the phallic mother remains intact’.<sup>193</sup> I suggest that for Lee, this androgynous figure functions as an alternative to the castrato in her supernatural tales allowing, via identification, the expression of an androgynous lesbian identity. It also simultaneously permits a regression to a pre-Oedipal identity and a fusion with the mother which manifests itself in the seemingly heterosexual adulation and desire for the Virgin who is sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly present in the figure of the doll. Existing in that borderline between life and death, reality and fantasy, the doll provides Lee with an ideal surface for the projection of, and negotiation of alternative identities and transgressive sexual desires. In a recent series of photographs called ‘Dark Glass’, Valentin Vallhonrat explores the nature of simulacra, and argues that it is these ‘inanimate wax, wood, and latex faces ... [that] enable us to become intimate with our own images

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<sup>191</sup> Quoted in Pacteau, p. 70.

<sup>192</sup> Pacteau, p. 70.

<sup>193</sup> Pacteau, pp. 81-82.



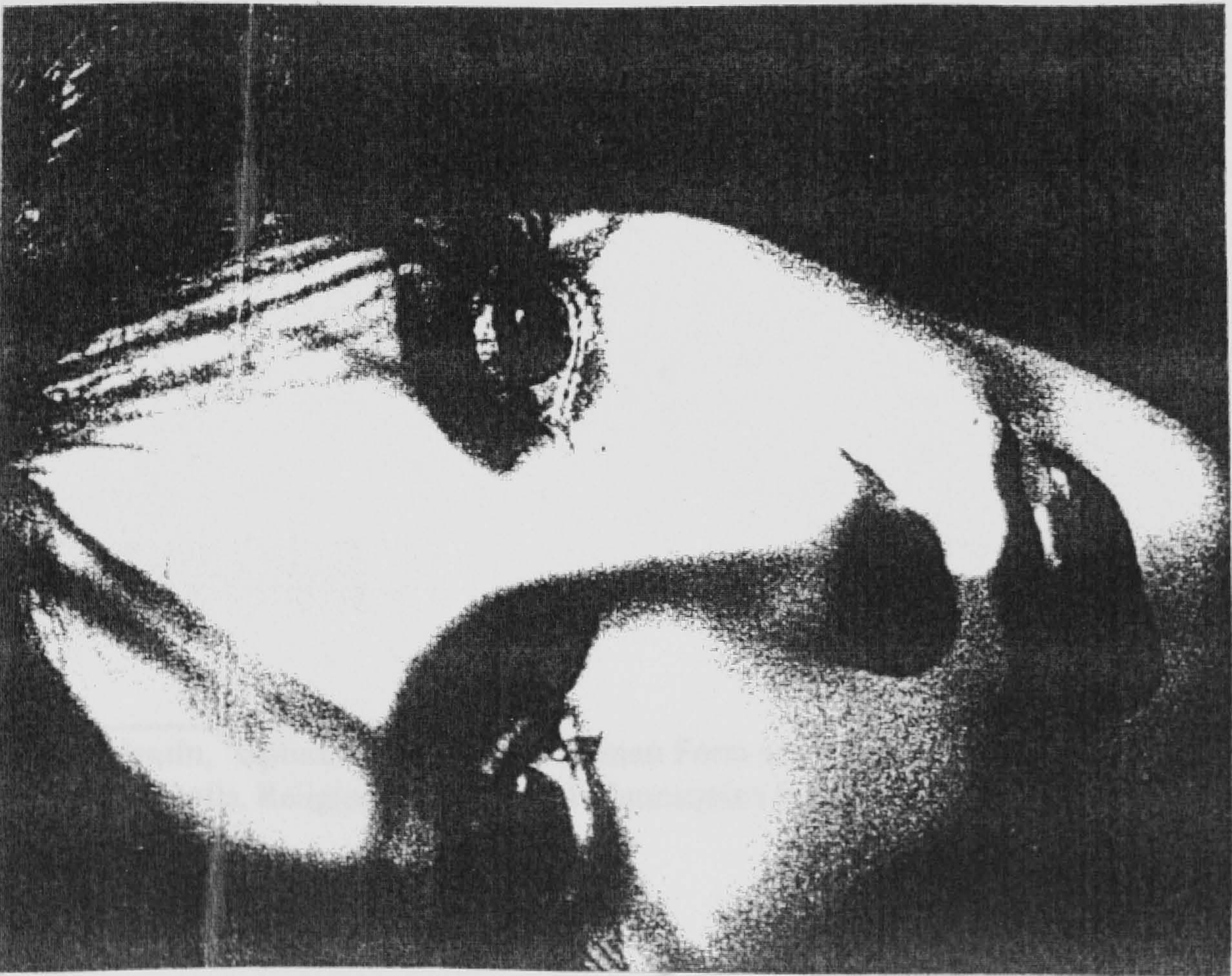


Fig. 15 Valentin Vallhonrat, Untitled, No. 23, from the series 'Cristal Oscuro' (Dark Glass), 1995.



Fig. 16 Valentin Vallhonrat, Untitled, No. 21, from the series 'Cristal Oscuro' (Dark Glass), 1995.



and to recover personal spaces, culturally broken off from ourselves' (figs. 15 and 16).<sup>194</sup>

One senses that Vernon Lee might have quietly, if not openly, agreed.

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<sup>194</sup> Vallhonrat, Valentin, 'Optical Illusions (The Human Form seen as Statuary Come to Life in the Haunting Images of Dolls, Religious Figures, and Mannequins in the series "Dark Glass")', *Aperture*, 155, (1999), 38-40, (p. 38).

## Madonna Portraits and Medusan Mirrors



*This is her picture as she was:  
It seems a thing to wonder on,  
As though mine image in a glass  
Should tarry when myself am gone.*  
Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1881)<sup>1</sup>

The haunting portrait-double of the Italian Count's deceased wife in 'The Doll' originally surfaced in a short essay entitled 'The Blame of Portraits' published in *Hortus Vitae: Essays on the Gardening of Life* (1904), in which Vernon Lee writes eloquently of the futility of the portrait form. Our 'humble desire for a likeness' of our loved ones is, she argues,

one of our most signal cravings after the impossible: an attempt to overcome space and baffle time; to imprison and use at pleasure the most fleeting, intangible, and uncommunicable of all mysterious essences, a human personality.<sup>2</sup>

According to Lee, the impossibility of this desire is particularly acute when the portrait functions as a *memento mori*, and she illustrates her point using as example the uncanny figure in 'The Doll'. From the passage below it is clear that her tale, not published until 1927, had already been written by 1904, and that the encounter which inspired it had had a profound effect. Lee writes:

Perhaps I feel more strongly on this subject because I happen to have seen with my own eyes the *reductio ad absurdum* - to absurdity how lamentable and dreadful! - of this same human craving for literal preservation of that which should

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Portrait', in *Selected Poems & Translations*, ed. by Clive Wilmer (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), pp. 53-56, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> Vernon Lee, 'The Blame of Portraits', in *Hortus Vitae: Essays on the Gardening of Life*, (London and New York: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1904), pp. 139-47, (p. 140).

not, cannot, be preserved. I wrote a little tale about it; but the main facts were true, and far surpassed the power of invention ... In a small way, we all of us commit that man's mistake of thinking that the life of our dear ones is in an image, instead of in the heartbeats which the image - like a name, a place, any associated thing - can produce in ourselves. And only changing things can answer to our changing self; only living creatures live with us. Once learned by heart, the portrait, be it never so speaking, ceases to speak, or we to listen to its selfsame message.<sup>3</sup>

Whilst Lee's argument is certainly valid, historical evidence suggests that without man's attempts to represent the dead, the world would have been denied an important record of its human, and aesthetic past for, as Ewa Kuryluk observes, in ancient Rome which according to Hilde Zaloscer is the 'true homeland of the portrait', 'Deathmasks as *memento mori* for the living played an important role ... and might have contributed to the extreme naturalism of Roman portrait sculpture'.<sup>4</sup> The Romans' artistic preservation of the dead is particularly fascinating and resonates interestingly with the macabre doll in Lee's tale. Kuryluk writes:

In order to preserve the faces of the dead from corruption, which progressed rapidly in the hot climate, the Romans covered them with wax masks. The masks were later used as models for wax figures, the *imagines*, which, like the dolls of the contemporary wax cabinets, were painted by a *pollinctor* in natural colors, equipped with hair, and dressed. Pliny ... tells us that wax models of faces were set out on separate sideboards and carried in procession ... After the funeral the likenesses were exhibited in sarcophaguslike [*sic*] boxes in the *atrium*, *alea*, or *vestibulum* of their family houses. Portrait-busts and statues as well as portrait-shields of military leaders and heroes were derived from the *imagines* and shown in temples, public places, and private homes.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Lee, 'The Blame of Portraits', pp. 144-45.

<sup>4</sup> Ewa Kuryluk, *Veronica and Her Cloth: History, Symbolism, and Structure of a 'True' Image* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 206.

<sup>5</sup> Kuryluk, pp. 206-7.



The portrait form, it seems, has always been intimately related to death and, in a recent essay, Catherine Maxwell specifically associates the birth of portraiture with loss. Quoting from Pliny's *Natural History* (Bk. 10), Maxwell provides us with two accounts of the development of painting. In the first, Pliny argues that although the geographical location of its origin is imprecise, it is generally agreed that the art of painting began 'with tracing an outline round a man's shadow and consequently that pictures were originally done in this way'.<sup>6</sup> In the second, which discusses the origin of the plastic arts, the origin of portraiture is attributed to a female artist, the daughter of the first sculptor, 'Butades, a potter of Sicyon, at Corinth' who was in love with a young man.<sup>7</sup> When she learned that he was going abroad, she drew 'in outline on the wall the shadow of his face thrown by a lamp' on which her father 'pressed clay' and 'made a relief, which he hardened by exposure to fire with the rest of his pottery'.<sup>8</sup> From this less than auspicious beginning, the silhouette became, as Maxwell observes,

an important form of eighteenth and nineteenth-century portraiture in which a profile view of the subject's head and shoulders is depicted either by a black paper cut-out or in black ink. Most fashionable in the period 1750-1850, these silhouette portraits were also, according to the OED, known as 'shades'; a word which ... like its Latin antecedent *umbra*, has the advantage of meaning both 'shadow' and 'ghost'... An evocative outline which excludes the particularity of individual features, the silhouette is like a draft or sketch, a ghost of a drawing. Its partial portraiture brings the subject to mind but, repressing the fullness of her presence, reminds us that she is not there.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Pliny, as quoted in 'Imaginative Vision in Hardy's Poetry', text of paper given by Catherine Maxwell at *Victorian Literary Cultures and the Visual Arts*, conference at the University of Hertfordshire, 18th November 2000, to be published in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Richard Cronin, Anthony Harrison, and Alison Chapman (Blackwell, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Pliny, as quoted in Maxwell, 'Imaginative Vision in Hardy's Poetry'.

<sup>8</sup> Pliny, as quoted in Maxwell, 'Imaginative Vision in Hardy's Poetry'.

<sup>9</sup> Maxwell, 'Imaginative Vision in Hardy's Poetry'.

And, as Maxwell has written elsewhere, the fully realized portrait is equally elusive in its evocation for, like its ghostly counterpart, the silhouette, it too can be no more than an 'absent presence'.<sup>10</sup>

Although it is clearly the paradoxical nature of the portrait's tangible intangibility which is perceived as Lee's concern in 'The Blame of Portraits', Lee's discussion centres on the medium's inability to produce a 'pure' reflection: the 'imperfect likeness[es]' that appear on canvas being filtered through the artist's consciousness:

For the image of the sitter on the artist's retina is passed on its way to the canvas through a mind chock full of other images; and is transferred - heaven knows how changed already - by processes of line and curve, of blots of colour, and juxtaposition of light and shade, belonging not merely to the artist himself, but to the artist's whole school ... The difference due to the individual artist is even greater; and, in truth, a portrait gives the sitter's temperament merged in the temperament of the painter.<sup>11</sup>

Evidently, Oscar Wilde would have agreed, for in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890-91) Basil Hallward argues that 'every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter'<sup>12</sup> and in Arlo Bates' *A Problem in Portraiture* (1889), the portrait is similarly influenced by the artist, for Bates asserts that 'since every picture must contain something of the personality of the artist, it follows that a portrait-painter is sure to impress the character of his sitters'.<sup>13</sup> However, for Lee it is not only the

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<sup>10</sup> Maxwell, 'From Dionysus to "Dionea": Vernon Lee's Portraits', p. 253.

<sup>11</sup> Lee, 'The Blame of Portraits' pp. 141-42.

<sup>12</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Donald L. Lawler (New York: Norton, 1988), p. 10. This edition includes the texts of both the 1890, and the 1891 versions of Wilde's novel. All quotations used in this chapter are taken from the latter, and subsequent page references will be made in the text.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Kerry Powell, 'Hawthorne, Arlo Bates, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*', *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature*, 16 (1980), pp. 403-16, (p. 414).



contamination of the portrait that inhibits a 'true' image, but also its very stillness. She warns that 'During the *period of activity* of a portrait - I mean while we still, more or less, look at it - we must beware lest it take, in our memory, the place of the original and she fears that those 'unchanging features' which have 'the insistence of their definiteness and permanence, ... may insidiously extrude, exclude, the fleeting, vacillating outlines of the remembered reality'.<sup>14</sup> Lee was not alone in her concern, for George Eliot feared 'outward images lest they should corrupt the inward' and Robert Browning rejected a memorial bust of Elizabeth Barrett Browning on the grounds that whereas 'the inner light of the soul' could 'fill up all deficiency' and 'transfigure all actually there', the sculptor must '*make all out*' - and his facts would be nothing but 'the dead facts'.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, despite Lee's rejection of the portrait form as inadequate, and her sense of the *memento mori* as a futile attempt to cheat death, a photograph of Anne Meyer, an early love who died in 1883 (or early 1884), would hang over Lee's bed till her death in 1935.<sup>16</sup> Contrasting with the view she expresses in 'The Blame of Portraits,' Lee, in a diary entry relating to Meyer's death, reveals an apparent preference for the commemorative portrait over the reality. In the death of her friend, she argues, she 'lost nothing or but little' of the real Mme Meyer, 'for does there not remain, unchanged and unchangeable, the

<sup>14</sup> Lee, 'The Blame of Portraits', p. 146.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Barbara Onslow, 'Deceiving Images, Revealing Images: The Portrait in Victorian Women's Writing', *Victorian Poetry*, 33 (1995), pp. 450-75, (p. 456); quoted in Pearsall, p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Gunn tells us that Anne Meyer was the aunt of one of Vernon Lee's friends, Alice Callander. Lee became passionately attached to Meyer and that the friendship lasted for two years. When the rupture came, Lee was deeply hurt. Interestingly, Lee was to look for Meyer's likeness in future friendships and when she meets Kit Anstruther Thomson in 1887 she describes her as having 'the face of Annie Meyer' (see Gunn, pp. 96, 119).

imagined one?"<sup>17</sup> According to Lee, the advantage of the 'imagined' beloved lies in the fact that one cannot lose 'the creature born of one's fancy and one's desires, the unreal'.<sup>18</sup>

This diary entry seems to specifically contradict the crux of her later essay which is that art can never replace the reality. However, her earlier preference for the fantasy may have its basis in insecurity for, as Susan Navarette observes, 'the desires that she voices' in her diary 'are inseparable from those she felt "for artificial ideal beings ... who can never shift the moral light in which we see them, who can never turn round in their frames and say 'see, we are not what you imagined' ".<sup>19</sup> Lee's proprietary gaze allows a control that defies the subject's autonomy and her initial partiality for the inanimate portrait is perhaps a reflection of her own unsatisfactory relationship with Anne Meyer for as she writes in her journal:

It was, to a great extent, still-born, that friendship between her and me. It is sad to have to admit to myself that had she lived, we might not have got much nearer to one another, never perhaps to that point of seeing, of being able to touch and embrace the whole personality which, in my opinion, is the only complete friendship. Things went quickly with a woman of her ardent, impatient, imperious temper; things usually go quickly with a woman so imaginatively impressionable, as passionate, wayward and vain as myself ... perhaps I should add as naked? ... It is most sad ... that these two years of friendship ... were but a sort of long duel; were spent in vainly trying to tear the mask off each other, to find each other's heart, and in warding off, covering up with artificialities one's real personality.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Lee, 'Some (slightly!) autobiographical notes viz A. M. in memoriam' 8th April, 1883, quoted in Gardner, pp. 308-12, p. 312. Although the quotation does not explicitly refer to Meyer's photograph, it seems implicit in the rhetorical questions that immediately follow it in which Lee asks, 'Do I not know that one? Have I not lived by her side, leaned upon her in my trouble, looked into her face in my isolation; do I not see her eyes and mouth?' (see Gardner, p. 312).

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Gardner, p. 312.

<sup>19</sup> Navarette, p. 165; Lee, journal entry, 8th April, 1883, quoted in Navarette, p. 165.

<sup>20</sup> Lee, journal entry, 8th April, 1883, quoted in Gunn, pp. 96-97.



It seems that the primitive fear that one's spirit or soul can be captured in a photographic reproduction, has in some sense been realized in Vernon Lee's fantasy. In possessing Meyer's photograph she appears to possess that entity which so eluded her in the years of their friendship - Meyer herself - who is now at the mercy of Vernon Lee's imagination. One might suggest that instead of allowing a fantasy relationship that can come to a psychic, if not physical, fruition, the stillness of the photographic medium ensures that her 'still-born' friendship with Meyer is preserved forever, suspended in limbo, echoing in its posed artificiality that mask that veiled Anne Meyer's 'real personality'. Yet, as Lee points out, the nature of this possession is rooted in fancy: the photograph's very inanimacy allows a static surface for the projection of fantasy and we will return to the portrait's role in this process in due course.

Lee's rejection of the containing power of the portrait in 'The Blame of Portraits' seems at odds with the opinion she voices with regard to those other arts, music and sculpture for, as we have seen, music 'exists as an art' only where 'the emotional cry or the spontaneous imitation' is subjected to 'a process of acoustic mensuration', and the sculptural ideal exists only in the perfect lines of ancient Greek statues: those 'silent, motionless people of marble'.<sup>21</sup> Given the proclivity for 'form' that characterizes Lee's aesthetics, we cannot but ask why the 'form' of the portrait should be rejected in favour of the fluid reality or the evanescent memory? The answer lies perhaps in the fact that Lee considered portraiture to be 'a curious bastard of art, sprung ... from a desire which is not artistic, nay, if anything, opposed to the whole nature and function of art - the desire for the mere likeness of a person'.<sup>22</sup> As portraiture is not what Lee considers a 'pure' art,

<sup>21</sup> Vernon Lee, 'Chapelmaster Kreisler' p. 117; 'Orpheus in Rome' p. 92.

<sup>22</sup> Vernon Lee, 'The Portrait Art of the Renaissance', *Cornhill Magazine*, 47 (1883), pp. 564-81, (p. 565).

it would appear that it is not subject to the same aesthetic rules, and it is clear that in her essay 'The Portrait Art of the Renaissance' (1883), from which this quotation is taken, Lee is at pains to leave the subject of portrait painting behind in order to concentrate on the 'superior' art of portrait sculpture. Yet, the portrait's intimate association with the self may also be a factor.

For Pierre Nicole, a seventeenth-century logician and moralist, the language of painting and portraiture becomes a powerful metaphor for the understanding of self and our relations to others:

We are all with respect to one another like the man who acts as model to pupils in painting academies. Each of those who surround us forms a portrait of us and the different ways in which our actions are regarded permit the formation of an almost infinite variety of portraits.<sup>23</sup>

The linguistic ambiguity of the last sentence allows alternative interpretations: if those around us form portraits of us, they may not only create an independent portrait but they may also themselves be 'portraits' of us, of our effects on their psyche. Interestingly, Lee's description of Anne Meyer implies a doubling of identity that is suggestive in this context. For Lee, Meyer is 'a woman so imaginatively impressionable, as passionate, wayward and vain as myself' and it is possibly this doubling that leads to Vernon Lee's change of heart regarding portraiture in 'The Blame of Portraits', for it represents perhaps a recognition that her 'captive' beloved's image simultaneously captures her own and prevents that fluidity which is integral to her negotiation of her own identity. Yet our

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<sup>23</sup> 'Traité de la connaissance de soi-meme', quoted in Louis Marin, 'The Figurability of the Visual: The Veronica or the Question of the Portrait at Port-Royal', *New Literary History*, 22 (1991), pp. 281-296, (p. 285).



logician offers an alternative process where the self becomes our own artistic construction:

One must act more or less in this life as if one had a life-long undertaking to paint one's portrait, that is to say that one must add everyday a few strokes of the brush without blotting out what has already been painted ... By this means [by this continuous portraiture] we will form little by little a portrait so resembling that we will be able to see at any moment everything which we are.<sup>24</sup>

As Louis Marin observes, according to this method, 'The true portrait is not under the layers of paint; it is made up of these strokes, these marks and these remarks'.<sup>25</sup> The true portrait is 'the *figure of an excess* formed by repeated strokes, and not that of a *personal essence* obtained by rubbing out'.<sup>26</sup> However, as Marin points out, this excess can be problematic for 'at each moment, by the addition of a new stroke, this resemblance becomes unlike itself ... by "amassing" and by "excess" ' the 'spectator - painter of his own portrait' runs up 'against the de-facement of his own face': the self becomes a 'formless mass'.<sup>27</sup>

While Marin's philosopher is concerned with the moral development of man, his metaphor provides an interesting model to apply to Vernon Lee's relationship with portraiture in her life and in her work. In a letter to her publisher John Lane at The Bodley Head dated the 13th January 1908, Lee makes her own position regarding her image particularly clear. In reply to Lane's request for the use of her photograph on one of her publications Lee writes:

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<sup>24</sup> Nicole, quoted in Marin, pp. 286-87.

<sup>25</sup> Marin, p. 286.

<sup>26</sup> Marin, p. 286.

<sup>27</sup> Marin, p. 287.

As I have refused two other publishers, and everyone else the right to use any portrait of mine, Sargent's included, I have to be consistent [and] say no. I hate this hawking about of people's faces. I took a *nom de plume* in order to keep my private personality separate from my literary one.<sup>28</sup>

It is apparent from this passage that Lee is intent on constructing her own literary identity and, on the surface, her reluctance in agreeing to Lane's request appears perfectly reasonable. However, the fact remains that, by 1908, it was no longer a secret that 'Vernon Lee' was a woman. Moreover, Lee's androgynous pen-name is itself a reflection of her own sexual ambiguity which is equally evident in John Singer Sargent's 1889 sketch in which she wears mannish clothes and an air of youthful masculine arrogance (fig. 17). One wonders, then, whether it was not so much the division between public and private perception that Lee feared, as its coalescence. Interestingly, portraits of Lee seem to lack a distinct form. Sargent's 1889 sketch of Lee has an unfinished quality; his earlier portrait of her (1881), while capturing 'the expressiveness and intelligence' of her face, lacks that clarity of line which generally marks Sargent's portraiture, and a later painting by Mme Berthe Noufflard (1934) is similarly indistinct (fig. 18).<sup>29</sup> Although each of these images displays an indefinable energy, one could argue that the resistance of the sitter is equally in evidence, and it seems significant that the women in the supernatural tales to be discussed in this chapter- Medea da Carpi, Alice Oke, and Dionea - similarly resist being captured and/or remaining captive in art.

Portraits of Lee, then, appear to retain that 'formlessness' which is a feature of the Port-Royal philosopher's subject in process. However, in representing the art form

<sup>28</sup> Letter to John Lane at The Bodley Head, 13th of January, 1908, Harry Ransom Research Centre, University of Texas, at Austin, USA.

<sup>29</sup> Gunn, p. 90.





Fig. 17 John Singer Sargent, *Vernon Lee*, 1889, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.



Fig. 18 Berthe Noufflard, *Vernon Lee*, 1934



in which we see ourselves reflected, portraits also have a primal significance. Not only does the portrait function as a kind of 'mirror', it is also, arguably, linked to its organic 'precursor' which in 'individual emotional development' is 'the mother's face'.<sup>30</sup> D. W. Winnicott argues that for the sighted infant, the mother's gaze functions as the primary confirmation of self resulting in the formulation: 'When I look I am seen, so I exist'.<sup>31</sup> This initial affirmation of self is, according to Winnicott, crucial to our own reactions to ourselves and others, and those who have an unsatisfactory visual experience of the mother will doubt their own reality and continue to seek the mother's face in the faces of others. In explaining the process with an example taken from his clinical analyses, Winnicott describes the case of a female patient who has been damaged psychologically by the effects of depression on the maternal face. As a result she has 'a marked absence of just that which characterizes so many women, an interest in the face'.<sup>32</sup> The severity of her case required that Winnicott displace the mother in order to allow the patient's progression into an independent and acknowledged identity. Towards the end of her seemingly successful treatment the patient sends Winnicott a portrait of her nurse.

Winnicott writes:

I had already had her mother's portrait and I have got to know the rigidity of the mother's defences very intimately. It became obvious that the mother ... had chosen a depressed nurse to act for her so that she might avoid losing touch with the children altogether. A lively nurse would automatically have 'stolen' the children from the depressed mother ... This same week this patient found a picture of my face on a book cover. She wrote to say she needed a bigger version so that she could see the lines and all the features of this 'ancient landscape' ... This

<sup>30</sup> D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 111.

<sup>31</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 114.

<sup>32</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, pp. 115-16.



patient thought that she was quite simply acquiring the portrait of this man who had done so much for her ... But what she needed to be told was that my lined face had some features that link for her with the rigidity of the faces of her mother and her nurse. I feel sure that it was important that I knew this about the face, and that I could interpret the patient's search for a face that could reflect herself, and at the same time see that, because of the lines, my face in the picture reproduced some of her mother's rigidity.<sup>33</sup>

What is particularly interesting about this passage is that it underlines the inevitability of the patient's search for the mother's face, and the need to see it in others even though, or perhaps *because* it initially failed to respond to a fundamental childhood need. What is even more important for my own purpose is that Winnicott does not restrict this search to known faces. He argues that the unknown image can be equally suggestive. Referring to portraits by Francis Bacon, Winnicott argues:<sup>34</sup>

From the standpoint of this chapter this Francis Bacon of today's date is seeing himself in his mother's face, but with some twist in him or her that maddens both him and us ... Bacon's faces seem to me to be far removed from perception of the actual; in looking at faces he seems to me to be painfully striving towards being seen, which is at the basis of creative looking.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, pp. 115-16.

<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, from the following description which appears in *The Handling of Words* (1923), it seems that Lee's perception of her own mother's personality is informed by contradictory impressions which create a vacillating and fluid identity: 'She was, in truth, at once intensely poetical and excessively prosaic; permeated with cynicism yet beyond description sentimental and idealizing; philosophically abstract and passionately personal in all her judgements; more logical than all the Encyclopédistes rolled into one, and childishly unreasonable and credulous whenever herself and her belongings were concerned ... She was, briefly, a mass of contradictions ... overflowing with sympathy and ruthlessly unforgiving; dreadfully easily wounded and quite callous of wounding others; she was deliciously tender, exquisitely humorous, extraordinarily grim and at moments terrifying; always difficult to live with and absolutely adorable'. See Vernon Lee, *The Handling of Words and other Studies in Literary Psychology*, (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1927), pp. 299-301. This passage is particularly fascinating as it suggests that Matilda Paget, like those 'maternal' figures that appear in Lee's works, was herself, a subject in a state of flux, a mother who was simultaneously reassuring and dangerous.

<sup>35</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 114.

Winnicott's opinion of Bacon appears to be supported by the detail that he preferred his paintings to be glazed not only because 'the fortuitous play of reflections' would enhance his pictures, but also because they gained 'by enabling the spectator to see his own face in the glass'.<sup>36</sup>

For Winnicott, then, the portrait is crucially linked to the mother's face and to our perception of our own identity in that face. Given this model, the prevalence of the portrait in Lee's tales is suggestive. Not only does it indicate an exploration of the self in these portraits, it also suggests that this journey is undertaken within the 'safe' 'holding environment' of the maternal gaze and the mother's simultaneous absence and presence which, according to Winnicott, is a primary feature of the maternal role in the transitional object phase. If we consider those 'portraits' which appear in the preceding chapters: the haunting painting of Rinaldo in 'Winthrop's Adventure'; the engraving of Zaffirino, in 'A Wicked Voice'; the sculptural portraits of Marsyas in 'Marsyas in Flanders', and of Venus in 'St. Eudaemon and His Orange Tree'; the 'live picture' that is Anne Brown,<sup>37</sup> and the unsettling portraits of 'blossom-mouthed' women in *Miss Brown*; the madonna paintings that feature Maddalena's face in 'A Wedding Chest'; the portrait of the madonna and the coloured prints of nuns in 'Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child'; the 'portrait' statue of the Virgin in 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers'; and the Count's disturbing doll with her 'Ingres Madonna face' in 'The Doll'; we can see that all are associated either directly or indirectly with the mother, either via the maternal voice or the

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 117.

<sup>37</sup> When Anne tries on the dress of Cretan silk she has been asked to wear by Hamlin, she looks at herself in the mirror and sees a 'colossal woman, with wrinkled drapery clinging to her in half-antique, half-medieval guise' and questions why this dress should make such a difference to Hamlin asking, 'Did he care for her only as a sort of love picture?' (Lee, *Miss Brown*, 1: 305-9).



maternal body. What, then, can we infer from what Burdett Gardner calls Lee's 'most permanent identification' with 'that photograph of Anne Meyer's dead face, which hung at the head of her bed for fifty years' ?<sup>38</sup>

Gardner makes a direct link between Meyer and Vernon Lee's self-image, locating in Meyer, not only another version of the 'semivir idol', but the primary one. For Gardner, she is that initial 'feminine counterpart of Miss Paget's own idealized image' who conveniently fulfils the criteria of being both 'static and dead' in order to allow Lee's projection of that 'pure, abstract essence' which he identifies as 'the essence of female superiority'.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, he goes on to suggest that those ghosts which feature in Lee's tales are based on Meyer herself:

The whole body of Miss Paget's fiction is dominated by the theme of haunting, and, from the basic identity of the haunting images, we may conclude that they all owe something to Miss Paget's personal Madonna, Anne Meyer, full of every 'Vernon Lee' grace and immune to every Violet Paget frailty.<sup>40</sup>

As I argue in Chapter Two, there is little doubt that Gardner's 'semivir idol' functions as a form of double for Vernon Lee. Moreover, as I have already suggested, the 'semivir idol' is also linked to that primary 'idol' of human affection - the mother. Gardner, however, fails to make an explicit connection between Anne Meyer and the mother despite the fact that such an association is implicit in his choice of words for he describes Anne Meyer as Lee's personal 'Madonna' - a figure that functions as the image of

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<sup>38</sup> Gardner, p. 316.

<sup>39</sup> Gardner, p. 316.

<sup>40</sup> Gardner, p. 377. Anne Meyer, whose existence for Lee is realized in her photograph, is perhaps also linked to Lee's ghosts by the very nature of her portrait which is itself, as Catherine Maxwell observes, an 'absent presence'.

universal motherhood. Furthermore, Meyer's role as the departed object of desire inevitably associates her with the mother who is the primary 'lost' object, and arguably it is this loss that is suggested by Lee's claim that the portrait represents 'one of our most signal cravings after the impossible: an attempt to overcome space and baffle time': elements which characterize the desires of the protagonists in Lee's portrait tales.<sup>41</sup> In addition, the passionate nature of the friendship between Meyer and Lee suggests that, for Lee, the photograph of Meyer stands in place of those Madonna paintings that were to enthrall Freud's Dora and Sister Benvenuta signifying an expression of same-sex desire.<sup>42</sup> Lee's portrait ghosts may indeed be versions of Anne Meyer but, if we are to agree with Lee's assertion in 'The Blame of Portraits' that all such works are portraits of the artist as well as of the sitter, then the paintings that appear in Lee's tales take on an added significance. Those portraits of Medea da Carpi, Alice Oke, and Dionea are all effectively 'painted' by Lee and must therefore reveal, by her own suggestion, aspects of herself, and in the light of Winnicott's thesis, must indicate her own relationship with the maternal object of desire. Lee's portraits, then, like the voice-object, the sculpture, and the doll, function as 'transitional objects' - objects that are both part of, and external to Lee, which are 'played' with beneath the 'maternal' gaze of the portraits' sitters. As such, they arguably play an interesting role in Lee's negotiation of identity, and it is with

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<sup>41</sup> Lee, 'The Blame of Portraits', p. 140.

<sup>42</sup> In his essay on the portraits in Lee's tales Sandro Melani observes that Trepka's sexual response to Medea's portraits is similarly in evidence in other characters' reactions to the medium in other texts. Melani writes: 'What Winthrop feels in front of Rinaldi's portrait is an ambiguous erotic agitation, similar to Spiridion Trepka's masochistic tremors before Medea da Carpi's image or the adulterous temptations which Alice Oke satisfies by identifying herself with her ancestor' See Melani, 'I ritratti fatali di Vernon Lee' (Vernon Lee's Fatal Portraits), *Rivista di Studi Vittoriani*, 1, (1996), pp. 125-41, (pp. 138-39). Translations included in this chapter are by Franca Basta. While I believe that Alice Oke's identification with her ancestor can be read quite differently, Melani's examples nevertheless suggest that the erotic charge implicit in Lee's portraits crosses boundaries of sex and time.



these considerations in mind that I now turn to two of her tales, 'Amour Dure: Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka', and 'Oke of Okehurst; or The Phantom Lover'.<sup>43</sup>

### **'Amour Dure: Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka'**

The Diarist of 'Amour Dure', is Spiridion Trepka a young Polish scholar who has come to Italy to write a history of Urbania. This task soon becomes secondary to his fascination with the 'strange figure' of the beautiful Medea da Carpi, a powerful woman from Urbania's past (8). For Trepka, 'This woman's history and character remind one of that of Bianca Capello, and at the same time of Lucrezia Borgia' (8-9). It is a violent history which results in the deaths of five of Medea's lovers and concludes with her assassination at the age of twenty-seven, carried out at the request of Duke Robert, brother to her deceased husband Duke Guidalfonso II. Fearing the political implications of Medea's sexual power over men, Robert ensures that she dies at the hands of two women, both infanticides, over whom she can hold no sway. Such is Robert's horror of Medea whom he sees 'as something almost supernatural', that thoughts of meeting her after death cloud his existence (26). As a precaution against this, his astrologer concocts a device, a silver image that represents Robert's soul, which is attached to his statue after death that he might sleep, 'awaiting the Day of Judgment, fully convinced that Medea's

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<sup>43</sup> 'Amour Dure: Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka' and 'Oke of Okehurst; or The Phantom Lover' were published together in *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (London: Heinemann, 1890), along with 'Dionea' and 'A Wicked Voice'. 'Amour Dure' had been published in *Murray's Magazine*, 1 (1887), and as 'Fragments du Journal du Professeur Spiridion Trepka', trans. by Robert de Cérisy [Mme. Gaston Paris] in *Revue Politique et Littéraire*, 42 (1888) before being repeated in *Hauntings* (1890). 'Oke of Okehurst; or The Phantom Lover' was previously published separately under the title of 'A Phantom Lover: A Fantastic Story' by Blackwood (1886).

soul will then be properly tarred and feathered, while his ... will fly straight to Paradise' (27). Trepka's interest in Medea's history is fuelled by his own erotic fascination with the past for he perceives himself as 'wedded to history, to the Past, to women like Lucrezia Borgia, Vittoria Accoramboni, or that Medea da Carpi' (21). The women of his own day have no attraction for him, and retreat further in his consideration with every portrait of Medea he encounters, of which there are several. The first is a miniature, sent to a prospective lover 'in order to turn his head' (16). The second is 'a marble bust in the palace lumber-room' and the third is 'a large composition', in which Trepka perceives the figure of Medea in the character of Cleopatra kneeling in an attitude of supplication before Augustus, an 'idealised portrait of Robert II', and 'baring her breast for the victor to strike, but in reality to captivate him,' as 'he turns away with an awkward gesture of loathing' (16-17). Yet it is the miniature which initially captures Trepka's imagination. Although, as represented in the portrait, Medea's seems at first 'A curious, ... rather conventional, artificial-looking sort of beauty, voluptuous yet cold', Trepka observes that 'the more it is contemplated, the more it troubles and haunts the mind' (18): .

The face is a perfect oval, the forehead somewhat over-round, with minute curls, like a fleece, of bright auburn hair; the nose a trifle over-acquiline, and the cheek-bones a trifle too low; the eyes grey, large, prominent, beneath exquisitely curved brows and lids just a little too tight at the corners; the mouth also, brilliantly red and most delicately designed, is a little too tight, the lips strained a trifle over the teeth. Tight eyelids and tight lips give a strange refinement, and, at the same time, an air of mystery, a somewhat sinister seductiveness ... The mouth with a kind of childish pout, looks as if it could bite or suck like a leech (17).



Around Medea's neck Trepka notices 'a gold chain with little gold lozenges at intervals, on which is engraved the posy or pun ... "Amour Dure - Dure Amour" (love that lasts, cruel love)' (18).<sup>44</sup> The haunting quality of the miniature is repeated with redoubled effect in the final portrait of Medea which Trepka discovers unexpectedly. Attracted by 'a very beautiful old mirror-frame' he finds in one of the 'irregular-shaped closets' of the turreted palace, Trepka looks into the glass and is startled by what he sees reflected there:

I gave a great start, and almost shrieked ... Behind my own image stood another, a figure close to my shoulder, a face close to mine; and that figure, that face, hers! Medea da Carpi's! ... On the wall opposite the mirror ... hung a portrait. And such a portrait! - Bronzino never painted a grander one. Against a background of harsh, dark blue, there stands out the figure of the Duchess (for it is Medea, the real Medea, a thousand times more real, individual, and powerful than in the other portraits), seated stiffly in a high-backed chair, sustained, as it were, almost rigid, by the stiff brocade of skirts and stomacher, stiffer for plaques of embroidered silver flowers and rows of seed pearl. The dress is, with its mixture of silver and pearl, of a strange dull red, a wicked poppy-juice colour, against which the flesh of the long, narrow hands with fringe-like fingers; of the long slender neck, and the face with bared forehead, looks white and hard, like alabaster. The face is the same as in the other portraits: the same rounded forehead, with the short fleece-like, yellowish-red curls; the same beautifully curved eyebrows, just barely marked; the same eyelids, a little tight across the eyes; the same lips, a little tight across the mouth; but with a purity of line, a dazzling splendour of skin, and intensity of look immeasurably superior to all the other portraits (32-33).

As in the miniature, Medea 'looks out of the frame with a cold, level glance', but here her lips smile an enigmatic smile that recalls that of Mona Lisa (33). In one hand she 'holds a dull-red rose' while the other 'plays with a thick rope of silk and gold and jewels hanging

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<sup>44</sup> The translation of 'Amour Dure-Dure Amour' poses a problem as there are subtle shifts in meaning with each version. Later in the text Trepka's translation is 'a constant and a cruel love' (p. 25), although 'constant love - cruel love' would be more consistent with the style of the device.

from the waist' (33). Around her throat, 'white as marble ... hangs a gold collar, with the device on alternate enamelled medallions, "Amour Dure - Dure Amour" '. (33). The portrait has a destabilizing effect on Trepka who begins to act erratically: he makes 'a snow-woman' he calls 'Medea' (35); he composes a song based on an Italian poem which begins 'Medea, mia dea' (Medea, my goddess); and begins to see manifestations of the dead Medea both in person and in print, for he spies Medea outside his window, and receives a letter from Medea asking him to meet her at 'the Church of San Giovanni Decollato' (38-39). Unable to resist the call, Trepka makes his way to the church which displays a marble relief over the door 'showing the grizzly head of the Baptist' and close to which lies an iron cage 'in which were formerly exposed the heads of criminals; the decapitated, or, as they call him here, decollated, John the Baptist, being apparently the patron of axe and block' (40). Finding the church locked, Trepka fears that a joke has been played on him, but suddenly hearing 'the voice of choristers and the drone of a litany' he retraces his steps and enters the church with ease finding it 'brilliantly illuminated with tapers and garlands of chandeliers' (41-42). The people he encounters are mysteriously dressed in old-fashioned clothes, and his eye is caught by 'a woman standing in the opposite aisle, close to the altar, and in the full blaze of its lights' (43). Wrapped in black and holding in her hand an unseasonal red rose, the woman 'loosened her heavy black cloak, displaying a dress of deep red, with gleams of silver and gold embroideries' (43). As she turns her head toward Trepka, her face caught in 'the full blaze of the chandeliers and tapers' reveals her identity to be that of no other but Medea da Carpi (43). Raising the leathern curtain, Medea glides out of the church, and Trepka



follows to find nothing but the empty street.

This first encounter is followed by others. On the second occasion, Medea leaves a rose, 'a real, living rose, dark red and only just plucked' which the next morning crumbles to dust in Trepka's fingers (47). The third occasion yields another letter which instructs Trepka to 'cut boldly into the body of the bronze rider who stands in the Corte' (the statue of Robert II), and to take out the silver effigy that protects Robert's soul, promising a reward for this proof of his love (49). On Christmas Eve, determined to gain his reward, Trepka heads for the statue, armed with a hatchet. On the way, he meets the ghostly forms of Medea's former lovers. Ignoring their warnings, he proceeds to meet his fate. Obsessed by his mission, and his love for Medea, Trepka saws the statue open, tears out the silver image, hacks it to pieces, and returns to his lodgings to await Medea. His last diary entry notes a step on the staircase which he interprets as hers: 'It is she! it is she! At last, Medea, Medea! Ah! Amour Dure - Dure Amour!' (58). An anonymous supplementary entry tells us that Trepka's body was later discovered, 'dead of a stab in the region of the heart, given by an unknown hand' (58).

Lee's Medea is evidently a variation of the phallic mother, recalling both the Virgin of the Seven Daggers with her 'tiny coral mouth', her brocaded skirts of 'silver roses', her body encased in a 'network of seed pearl' (97-98), and her dark counterpart, the Infanta, whose 'silver pallor' is broken by a 'mouth most subtly carmined' which rises above a breast 'covered with rows and rows of the largest pearls' (124). She is intimately associated with Leonardo's Mona Lisa and 'can be read as an animated version of Pater's portrayal of "La Gioconda" in *The Renaissance*' suggesting that the image of

the phallic mother and the fatal woman are here once again conflated for Medea is also linked to a series of *femmes fatales*: Lucrezia Borgia, Faustine, Cleopatra, the sirens, and to her necromantic namesake, Medea of Colchis.<sup>45</sup> With her enigmatic smile and cruel mouth, Medea also bears more than a passing resemblance to the castrato Zaffirino, with his ‘odd smile, brazen and cruel’ : their faces are both, like so many others in Lee’s fantastic tales, the ‘faces of wicked, vindictive women’.<sup>46</sup> Medea’s church, like that of the Virgin of the Seven Daggers, is saturated in images of castration: it is that of ‘San Giovanni Decollato’, ‘the voice of choristers’ (often castrati) herald her appearance (40-41), and the altar displays ‘a picture of the daughter of Herodias dancing’: an allusion to the decapitation/ castration of John the Baptist, which symbolically mirrors the incapacitation and intellectual ‘castration’ which Spiridion Trepka experiences as a result of his erotic obsession with Medea (45). Moreover, the tale is punctuated with coded references to castration: ‘white bullocks’ drag Trepka’s gig as he enters Urbania (4); the youths of Urbania are ‘like so many young Raphaels, with eyes like the eyes of bullocks’ (6); ‘great white bullocks’ work in the production of olive oil (34); and at a cattle-fair, ‘hundreds of immense white bullocks’ crowd the piazza under the city walls (45). Furthermore, Medea’s ‘brilliantly red’ mouth, which looks ‘as if it could bite or suck like

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<sup>45</sup> Christa Zorn, ‘Aesthetic Intertextuality as Cultural Critique: Vernon Lee Rewrites History through Walter Pater’s “La Gioconda”’, *Victorian Newsletter*, (1997), pp. 4-10, (p. 4).

<sup>46</sup> ‘A Wicked Voice, p. 206. The painting of Medea is also linked to those ‘blossom-mouthed women’ of pre-Raphaelite portraiture via its uncanny resemblance to the painting of Lucy Audley in Mary Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1861-62) which has ‘something of the aspect of a beautiful fiend’. Braddon writes: ‘Yes; the painter must have been a pre-Raphaelite. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have painted, hair by hair, those feathery masses of ringlets with every glimmer of gold, and every shadow of pale brown ... No one but a pre-Raphaelite could have given to that pretty pouting mouth the hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait ... Indeed, the crimson dress, the sunshine on the face, the red gold gleaming in the yellow hair, the ripe scarlet of the pouting lips, ... all combined to render the first effect of the painting by no means an agreeable one’. See Mary E. Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret* (Oxford: World’s Classics, 1987), pp. 70-71.



a leech' in a face framed by snake-like curls, recalls the dangerous 'vagina dentata', of Freud's 'Medusa's Head' (17). But the moment in the text which is perhaps most evocative of castration is Medea's 'unveiling' in full blaze of the blinding tapers that light the church, unwrapping her heavy cloak to reveal that 'dress of deep red' (43), of that 'wicked poppy-juice colour' (32), that mirrors that unveiling of the mother's wound and its 'blinding' effect which Freud associates with the psychic castration of the male. This image is heightened by Medea's association with the Virgin Mary, the universal mother of whom, as Sandro Melani observes, women like Medea are the 'blasphemous and sacrilegious reversal'.<sup>47</sup> Not only does the encounter take place in church but, as Christa Zorn suggests, Medea's appearance on this occasion 'bears a striking resemblance to Piero della Francesca's *Madonna della Misericordia*' (fig. 19).<sup>48</sup> Zorn writes:

When she appears to Trepka, she loosens 'her heavy black cloak, displaying a dress of deep red with gleams of silver and gold,' details which echo the open black cloak over a red dress of Piero's frontal Madonna, a massive cylindrical form which towers high above the smaller-scale human beings who invoke her. The *Madonna della Misericordia* conveys a sense of power similar to Medea's overbearing magnetism during the imaginary church service.<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, as Zorn goes on to point out, the image of Medea as the threatening mother is implicit throughout the tale and heightened by its violent dénouement:

Medea's fatal stroke on Christmas Eve and the fulfillment of Spiridion's desire in the moment of death ironically reverse the traditional conception of Christmas as a feast of birth and new life. The 'immaculate' Mother-and-Child myth, eagerly

<sup>47</sup> Melani, pp. 125-41, (p. 132).

<sup>48</sup> Zorn, 'Aesthetic Intertextuality', pp. 4-10, (n. 11, p. 7).

<sup>49</sup> Zorn, 'Aesthetic Intertextuality', pp. 4-10, (n. 11, p. 7).

promoted by religious discourses of the nineteenth century, is thus evoked and mocked by the conniving Renaissance Medea, who kills her lovers, and her mythological 'double,' who kills her children. Medea da Carpi's appearance obviously commands traditional Christian iconography: while she appears in the red and black garb of the Compassionate Madonna, she undermines the religious symbolism by the fear she spreads through her pattern of love and revenge. Like the mythological figure, Medea da Carpi is the 'unfeminine' woman and the 'unmotherly' mother (a female Cronos), who is a latent threat to established order.<sup>50</sup>

One might suggest that Medea's impact on Trepka, has from its inception had a 'castrating' and diminishing effect which receives its symbolic manifestation in the aisles of the haunted church. With each meeting Trepka becomes progressively unhinged, showing evidence of hysteria by which he is necessarily feminized. Spiridion Trepka, then, is arguably a 'castrated' male, a 'castrato'. Given Lee's identification with the castrato figure and his inverted double, the phallic woman, Trepka's desire for Medea is suggestive. Significantly, Trepka and Medea are 'twinned' within the text itself: Trepka's horoscope tallying 'almost exactly with that of Medea da Carpi' (50-51). This resonates interestingly with those other doublings and/or treblings that feature in many of the tales discussed in the previous chapters. Here, once again, the twinning of characters seems to reveal a negotiation of identity that extends beyond the tale itself into the fantasies of Lee herself: the fluid sexuality made possible by the process of doubling, allows her to express same-sex desire via a model of erotic exchange that is superficially heterosexual. As 'castrated male' and 'phallic woman' Trepka and Medea display an androgyny that is consistent with the latently homoerotic dyadic and triadic relationships we have encountered elsewhere in her fiction.

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<sup>50</sup> Zorn, 'Aesthetic Intertextuality', pp. 4-10 (pp. 6-7).



I suggest that the role played by the portrait, particularly by the final painting of Medea is crucial in this process. This portrait, as Adeline Tintner, Catherine Maxwell, and Christa Zorn have observed, owes a great deal to Bronzino's portrait of Lucrezia Panciatici (fig. 20).<sup>51</sup> Bronzino, a second generation Mannerist, is credited with introducing 'a new manner characterized by studied elegance and refined poise' in which a striking contrast is created between 'the detailed treatment given to rich costumes and the aloof, enigmatic faces.'<sup>52</sup> As Maria Rika Mariates observes:

The sitters look out at us, and yet there seems to be no point of contact between them and the onlooker. Their mysterious melancholy appears as an affectation, a quality emphasized by Bronzino through the extreme formalism of his portraiture.<sup>53</sup>

If, as it seems, Medea is indelibly associated with the figure of the mother, then Mariates' comments on Bronzino's portraiture have interesting implications. If, as Lee states in 'The Blame of Portraits', portraits are always filtered through the artist's consciousness, then her own artistic revision of the Bronzino portrait is telling. The portrait form, as we have seen, is intimately associated with our own responses to the mother's face. In conflating the aloofness of the Bronzino portrait with the image of Medea as the dangerous mother, and tracing its impact on Trepka, Lee enacts a process of identification and misidentification which she employs in many of the tales already discussed. I would

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<sup>51</sup> See Catherine Maxwell, 'From Dionysus to "Dionea": Vernon Lee's Portraits', Christa Zorn, 'Aesthetic Intertextuality', and Adeline Tintner, 'Bronzino's *Lucrezia Panciatici* in *The Wings of the Dove* via Vernon Lee' in *Henry James and the Lust of the Eyes: Thirteen Artists in His Work* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), pp. 95-104.

<sup>52</sup> Maria Rika Mariates, *Mannerism in Italian Music and Culture 1530-1630* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979), pp. 40-41.

<sup>53</sup> Mariates, p. 41.





Fig. 19 Piero della Francesca, *Madonna della Misericordia*, Palazzo Communale, Borgo San Sepolcro.



Fig. 20 Agnolo Bronzino, *Lucrezia Panciatichi*, The Uffizi, Florence.



claim that Trepka and Medea, like other characters in Lee's fiction, and particularly in her supernatural tales, form aspects of Lee herself. Trepka, like Lee, is a scholar, a writer, a male version of Vernon Lee, and Medea, as Burdett Gardner observes, bears features that recall those of Lee herself. According to Gardner, Medea's general description tallies with that of Lee in Sargent's 1889 sketch and, one particular detail, her 'fringe-like fingers' links her directly to Lee for Sargent once remarked that Lee's hands were 'like ornamental fringes'.<sup>54</sup> I suggest that the process Lee describes in 'The Blame of Portraits' where the personality of the artist merges with that of the sitter, appears to be at work in the figures of Trepka and Medea. Trepka, as writer/scholar, becomes the figure of Lee as 'artist', while Medea, with her physical resemblance to Lee, becomes the 'sitter', the subject displayed in art who simultaneously represents both artist and painted 'object'. Yet, here, Winnicott's theory, which posits the construction of the child's identity in the maternal 'mirror' is also at play. Infantilized by his desire, Trepka becomes the child who seeks himself in his mother's face, and searches for his identity in portraits of Medea: her simultaneous absence and presence providing a fantasy space for its construction. In this context, the portrait functions as both subject and object: it is both the 'mother' that allows the 'child' to explore his individuality in her silent presence, and the transitional object that plays a prominent role in that process. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that the portrait also functions as a form of mirror. Significantly, Trepka's encounter with the final portrait of Medea takes place, as we have seen, in a framed mirror which makes a 'portrait' of his own reflection. In looking at Medea,

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<sup>54</sup> Gardner tells us that Berthe Noufflard, who painted the 1934 portrait of Lee, reported this remark, and that Noufflard, in her own painting, also emphasized Lee's 'long, narrow hands'. See Gardner, p. 326.

Trepka is in some sense looking at himself and the play of reflections recall those that take place in the reflective glass that seals Francis Bacon's portraits.<sup>55</sup> Yet, her portrait's unresponsiveness suggests that Medea negates Trepka's identity. Not being 'seen', his own reality is in doubt and he retains that formlessness which characterizes the child's pre-Oedipal existence. Here, as in 'A Wicked Voice' the male 'artist', that counterpart to Lee's literary persona, finds his existence called into question as he is engulfed by a powerful feminine entity. Like Zaffirino's, Medea's dangerous magnetism functions as a form of maternal entrapment that recalls Michel Chion's 'umbilical net' which can be simultaneously reassuring and threatening. In this context 'Amour Dure: Dure Amour' (that constant and cruel Love) takes on a sinister significance: Medea's power, the power of the phallic woman, overrides and supersedes Trepka's intellectual power. Here, as in so many of Lee's other tales, her rejected female persona returns with magnified, and insistent, strength. In the tale itself an ambiguous ending cheats us of the knowledge of Trepka's murderer whom we suppose to be Medea. Yet, read symbolically in terms of Lee's negotiation of identity, Trepka's death could be read as a surrender, a surrender to the phallic woman: an acceptance of aggressive femininity.

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<sup>55</sup> In her book, *Seeing Through Clothes*, (London: University of California Press, 1993), Anne Hollander argues that the mirror 'is for seeing the self as a picture' and, as artist of this self-portrait, one 'is responsible for what is in a picture' (p. 398). As a result, 'Dislike and fear of this responsibility give rise to wishful myths about mirrors showing something uncanny, something different, something created by an agency other than the gazing self' (p. 398). If Trepka and Medea can be considered doubles, this encounter in the mirror suggests a fluidity of identity that is prompted by a subconscious exchange between Lee's gazing selves.



### **‘Oke of Okehurst; or The Phantom Lover’**

The latent doublings which take place in ‘Amour Dure’, are equally present in ‘Oke of Okehurst’ and I will examine these presently. Here, however, the double also plays a central part in the development of the tale. The story is narrated by an unnamed artist, ‘the model for whom was perhaps Sir John Sargent’, who arrives at Okehurst, a Jacobean manor in the Kent countryside, in order to paint the portraits of its owners, William and Alice Oke.<sup>56</sup> While William is a ‘magnificent specimen of a handsome Englishman’ (164), he is still like ‘a hundred other young men you can see any day in the Park’ (111-12). In contrast, his wife Alice, with her ‘exotic’ elegance and ‘marvellous, fantastic kind of grace’; her ‘strange cheeks’ and ‘exquisite and uncanny’ smile, proves a difficult subject (109-10). Pre-portrait sketches fill a ‘whole sketch-book’ yet the painting is ‘never finished’, and the artist expresses his regret in language that defines her elusiveness (109-10):

I wish, alas! - I wish, I wish, I have wished a hundred thousand times - I could paint her, as I see her now, if I shut my eyes - even if it were only a silhouette ... But where is the use of talking about her? I don’t believe, you know, that even the greatest painter can show what is the real beauty of a very beautiful woman in the ordinary sense: Titian’s and Tintoretto’s women must have been miles handsomer than they have made them. Something - and that the very essence - always escapes, perhaps because real beauty is as much a thing in time - a thing like music, a succession, a series - as in space. Mind you, I am speaking of a woman beautiful in the conventional sense. Imagine, then, how much more so in the case of a woman like Alice Oke (123-24).

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<sup>56</sup> Melani, p. 135.

Yet a portrait does exist, a portrait which is the uncanny double of Alice Oke. In the hall of Okehurst, hang companion portraits of the Okes' ancestors one of whom shares her Christian name with the current Alice, and is 'wonderfully like the present Mrs Oke' :

There were the same strange lines of figure and face, the same dimples in the thin cheeks, the same wide-opened eyes, the same vague eccentricity of expression ... One could fancy that this woman had the same walk, the same beautiful line of nape of the neck and stooping head as her descendant (131).

Moreover, the resemblance is heightened by the fact that 'the present Mrs Oke distinctly made herself up to look like her ancestress, dressing in garments that had a seventeenth-century look; nay, that were sometimes absolutely copied from this portrait' (131). The reasons for Alice Oke's strange interest in her ancestor soon become clear. In the 'heady and oppressive' atmosphere of the yellow drawing-room, a room supposedly haunted by Christopher Lovelock, a seventeenth-century poet reputed to be the earlier Alice's adulterous love, the current Alice Oke seemingly communes with the past, and conducts a ghostly flirtation with her ancestor's former lover. This 'communion' is signalled by a 'distant look in her grey eyes' and an 'absent-looking smile in her thin cheeks' (152).

From William Oke, who recoils from entering the room, the artist learns the bare bones of Lovelock's story. Riding home alone one evening, Lovelock had been 'attacked and murdered, ostensibly by highwaymen, but as was afterwards rumoured, by Nicholas Oke, accompanied by his wife dressed as a groom' (136). Alice, however, is only too happy to fill in the details and, intrigued by what he perceives to be her 'caprice' or 'mania' to 'resemble the Alice Oke of the year 1626', the artist indulges her fantasies and



requests that he might paint her in the yellow drawing-room. Here, Alice Oke reads him Lovelock's poems in 'a delicate, shadowy', voice which has 'a curious throbbing cadence, as if she were reading the words of a melody, and restraining herself with difficulty from singing it' (146). She also shows him that, on her writing-table in the yellow room, she keeps a portrait of Christopher Lovelock which stands 'as on an altar' behind 'a silk curtain ... the sort of thing behind which you would have expected to find a head of Christ or of the Virgin Mary' (147). Drawn back, the curtain reveals:

a large-sized miniature, representing a young man, with auburn curls and a peaked auburn beard, dressed in black, but with lace about his neck, and large pear-shaped pearls in his ears: a wistful, melancholy face (147).

In the heavy ambience of the room, Alice Oke takes on an almost sinister demeanour. For the artist, this 'exquisite woman' becomes 'something ... almost repulsive,' something, 'perverse and dangerous' (148). Slowly he becomes aware of the intensity of her 'mania': her Vandyck dress, which he had considered to be 'a modern copy' is the 'original dress of Alice Oke, ... - the dress in which, perhaps, Christopher Lovelock had seen her in that very room' (151), and when she talks of the former Alice, she enters so 'completely and passionately' into her feelings that she speaks of her as if she were 'not another woman, but herself' (153).

For William Oke, Alice becomes increasingly disturbing. In and out of the yellow drawing-room she torments his jealousy with sightings of the ghostly Lovelock, and at an impromptu masquerade she appears as 'a boy, slight and tall' in the costume in which her namesake, Alice Oke 'used to go out riding with her husband in the days of Charles I'

(165): the groom's outfit which Alice Oke had worn to murder Christopher Lovelock.

Provoked mercilessly, William Oke grows 'perfectly unstrung, like a hysterical woman'

(176), and finally murders his wife in the yellow drawing-room. Too late to prevent the tragedy, the artist enters only to find:

Oke ... standing in the middle of the room, with a faint smoke about him; and at his feet, sunk down from the sofa, with her blond head resting on its seat, lay Mrs. Oke, a pool of red forming in her white dress. Her mouth was convulsed, as if in that automatic shriek, but her wide-open white eyes seemed to smile vaguely and distantly (191).

According to Burdett Gardner, Alice Oke, like Medea, can be identified as a double of Lee herself. 'Tall and slender' and 'straight ... as a bamboo', her figure has 'a suppleness and a stateliness' that reminds the artist of a 'peacock' or a 'stag', and Gardner 'of numerous snapshot poses of Miss Paget herself in many of which she struck "picturesque" attitudes - as though seeking for striking, weird and recherché effects' (122-23).<sup>57</sup> Yet I would claim that here, as in 'Amour Dure', Lee's processes of identification are far more complex than Gardner's comments would suggest, and that the unnamed artist is also a facet of Lee. Like Spiridion Trepka who believes he understands Medea 'so well; so much better than my facts warrant' (101), the artist feels that he instinctively understands Alice's character 'so well' and argues that 'to understand it well seemed to imply ... a comfortable acquiescence' to her eccentricities (168). Moreover, like Trepka, the artist experiences a psychic 'castration' and is unable to complete his task after his encounter with an enigmatic woman.

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<sup>57</sup> Gardner, p. 335.



Like Medea, Alice is another version of the *femme fatale*: her ‘uncanny’ smile, her ‘exotic’ elegance and ‘marvellous, fantastic kind of grace’ recall the figure of Pater’s *La Gioconda*, and her indefinable beauty so strangely reminiscent of ‘a peacock’ or ‘a stag’ displays an androgynous quality which we also associate with the phallic mother. The moment in which Alice ‘unveils’ arguably takes place in the final scene where, according to Diana Basham, the ‘pool of red forming in her white dress’ functions as a ‘menstrual configuration’ which mirrors Medea’s symbolic exposure of the woman’s wound in ‘Amour Dure’.<sup>58</sup> While the artist’s ‘castration’ seemingly takes place after this incident, his psychic castration is prefigured by that of William Oke who is progressively feminized by his mounting hysteria, and I would suggest that the recurrent and forlorn bleating of ‘lambs separated from their mothers’ which punctuate the tale perform a dual function: they are both a prediction and reminder of their mutual maternal loss. Once again, I suggest that the artist doubles for Lee’s literary persona, ‘a rather unusual kind of man’, a counterpart to Alice Oke, ‘a very unusual kind of woman’ (121). Yet, unlike Magnus and Trepka, the artist in this tale does not fall in love with Alice Oke, although one might suggest that he experiences a strange attraction to Alice which forges his sympathy for William Oke.<sup>59</sup> However, the erotic focus of the tale is the triangular relationship between the nineteenth-century, and the seventeenth-century Alice Oke, and the poet, Christopher Lovelock.

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<sup>58</sup> Diana Basham, *The Trial of Woman: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 176.

<sup>59</sup> One might suggest that the connotations with ‘troilism’ traced in ‘A Wedding Chest’ are once more at play. In this context, the artist’s attraction to Alice Oke functions as a ‘cover’ for his homoerotic yearnings for William Oke, thus encoding homosexual desire in a normative heterosexual model.

Although Lovelock is ostensibly the object of desire, Dennis Denisoff argues otherwise. In 'Oke of Okehurst', Denisoff detects a manifestation of same-sex desire:

The force of the same-sex bond in "Oke of Okehurst" arises from the heroine's devotion to her namesake surpassing not only the portraitist's interest in the living Alice but also the dead Alice's dubious attachment to a lover who may have never existed and, if he did, whom she then helped murder. The incommensurability of Alice's main attraction, on the one hand, and generic and cultural conventions, on the other, causes a disjuncture that established social and textual narratives appear unable to reconcile without killing off the heroine. More precisely, Alice's murder is the result of her society's inability or unwillingness to accept her attachment to this woman from the past. William kills his wife not for her interest in another man but for her undying devotion to another woman.<sup>60</sup>

I agree with Denisoff that there is an implicit eroticism in the relationship between the two Alices, and would add that the relationship between the two women has interesting implications.<sup>61</sup> If Winnicott's psychoanalytic model holds true, then when the nineteenth-century Alice looks at the portrait of the seventeenth-century Alice, what she sees is a satisfying 'maternal' reflection that affirms her existence and her identity. If, as Burdett Gardner suggests, Alice Oke is a fictional version of Lee, then that identification also applies to Lee herself. Yet what kind of an identity is it? Not only does Alice Oke display the androgynous qualities of the phallic mother, she also masquerades as a groom, a 'beautiful boy' which, as Martha Vicinus has observed, has

<sup>60</sup> Denis Denisoff, 'The Forest beyond the Frame: Picturing Women's Desires in Vernon Lee and Virginia Woolf', in *Women and British Aestheticism*, ed. by Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), pp. 251-69, (p. 256).

<sup>61</sup> It seems particularly interesting that the 'vague undefinable repulsion' which Sacha Elaguine elicits in Anne Brown, (2: 292-93), is also experienced by the artist in 'Oke of Okehurst' who finds that in the atmosphere of the yellow drawing-room, an atmosphere stained by the colour of decadence, Alice Oke becomes '*something ... almost repulsive*' (p. 148). This concurrence of response to the two women suggests that Alice, like Sacha, may represent a homoerotic presence which problematizes the apparently heterosexual love triangle posited in Lee's tale.



a particular role to play in the expression of homosexuality.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, her 'diaphanous' 'incorporeality' (171, 188), suggests a ghostliness which identifies her with Medea, and both with the 'apparitional lesbian', that ghostly manifestation which Terry Castle identifies as haunting both overt and covert expressions of lesbian desire in literature and in film.<sup>63</sup> Her Sphinx-like nature also links her to another of Lee's ghosts, the castrato Zaffirino, for the Sphinx, like the castrato is a hybrid. Furthermore, like the castrato, the Sphinx was in the past 'characterized by her song', and Alice Oke, as we have seen, speaks in a 'throbbing cadence' that borders on song.<sup>64</sup> According to Monique Schneider, the Sphinx is transformed by Sophocles from 'The bitch [who] has bewitched us with her songs' into a reassuring image of the Freudian phallic mother: 'an examiner who asks questions' not a singer who sings songs.<sup>65</sup> For Schneider, this process functions as an imposition of the 'phallic, authoritative superego ... by force on the voice of the woman.'<sup>66</sup> In this way, 'The man doesn't have to listen to the voice of the woman, just as he doesn't have to listen to the voice of the sirens'.<sup>67</sup> Yet, as we have seen, in Lee's tales, the phallic mother - that inverted counterpart of the castrato - can be both reassuring and dangerous, and often wields a power that castrates even as it seems to protect the men with whom she comes into contact. Interestingly, in 'Oke of Okehurst' the Sphinx's song is seemingly restored and wreaks its castrative revenge on the artist who listens. Although the 'artist' identifies with Alice Oke through his instinctive

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<sup>62</sup> Vicinus, 'The Adolescent Boy: Fin-de-Siècle Femme Fatale?', p. 92.

<sup>63</sup> Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*, especially Ch. 1.

<sup>64</sup> Monique Schneider, 'Paris, Summers 1985 and 1986', in *Women Analyze Women*, ed. by Elaine Hoffman Barach and Lucienne J. Serrano (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988), pp. 167-203, (p. 194).

<sup>65</sup> Schneider, p. 195.

<sup>66</sup> Schneider, p. 195.

<sup>67</sup> Schneider, p. 195.

understanding, he is nevertheless ultimately disempowered, and left unable to recreate her image. Alice Oke, then, represents those aspects of Lee we have encountered elsewhere. In the narcissistic engagement between the two Alices we find, yet again, a return to a pre-Oedipal plenitude that allows Lee to explore same-sex desire, and Alice, like Medea, functions simultaneously as an expression of a powerful femininity that is denied to Lee, and which Lee denies herself, in her social and literary existence.

The Alice of 1626 may be the covert object of the nineteenth-century Alice's lesbian attraction, but the ostensible object of her desire in the text is Christopher Lovelock. However, in Lee's tale, Alice's erotic interests are not necessarily mutually exclusive. If we return to Lee's description of Lovelock's miniature, we find that it lies hidden behind a silk curtain, 'the sort of thing behind which you would have expected to find a head of Christ or of the Virgin Mary' (147). Interestingly Lovelock shares part of his name with Christ, and the lace and pearls which adorn him recall those ornately decorated madonnas we have encountered in previous tales. Given the link between Christ and the castrato traced in Chapter Two, 'Christ-opher' Lovelock takes on another meaning. Linked to this androgynous figure, the image in the miniature with its 'peaked auburn beard' and 'auburn curls', its lace and its pearls, is feminized. Moreover, like Christ, and the Virgin Mary, the miniature image of Lovelock's disembodied head recalls that other - the head of Medusa - who, as I suggest in Chapter One, is herself identified with the castrato. As Ewa Kuryluk observes,

The 'true' faces of Christ were preceded by the masks of Medusa. It is certain that her omnipresence in Graeco-Roman antiquity contributed to the popularity



of Jesus' and the Baptist's disembodied heads which, like those of Medusa, were depicted as either dark or light, and often with serpentine hair. Medusa's heads - horrible as well as beautiful, and occasionally furnished with beards - persisted throughout the Byzantine period, and at the beginning of the second millennium they could still be found on Russian amulets called *zmeeviki* (images with snakes).<sup>68</sup>

It seems that even with his peaked beard, Lovelock can represent a Medusan figure, a phallic Madonna, which is strangely worshipped with an intensity akin once again to that of Dora or of Sister Benvenuta enthralled by their Madonna paintings. In the light of these coded associations, the name 'Lovelock' becomes particularly significant: 'love-lock' figures as a word which characterizes the autoerotic quality of Alice Oke's obsession with her ancestor, and the nature of same-sex desire which is implicit in the seemingly heterosexual eroticism of Alice's desire for Christopher Lovelock. In this tale, as in so many others by Lee, same-sex desire is expressed via a heterosexual model, and in the 'potential space' of the supernatural, this fusion of sexual identities is 'legitimized' providing Lee with a forum for the negotiation of her own lesbian sexuality.

### **Portrait of a Vampire**

The magic portrait motif, employed in Lee's tales, has been a staple of Gothic fiction since the eighteenth century, playing a prominent part in such works as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). In the nineteenth century, the theme proliferated appearing in the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edith Nesbit, Edith Wharton, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry

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<sup>68</sup> Kuryluk, p. 153.

James, and Oscar Wilde, to name but a few.<sup>69</sup> While all could be usefully considered in relation to Lee, I wish to look particularly at James' 'The Story of a Masterpiece' (1868), Poe's 'The Oval Portrait' (1845)<sup>70</sup>, and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890-91) in order to compare the treatment of the artist in these works with that he receives in Lee's tales.

While James was also to employ the magic portrait motif in recognizable form in his later unfinished novel, *The Sense of the Past* (1917), 'The Story of a Masterpiece', which offers a more subtle use of the theme, has been chosen for its female protagonist, Marian Everett, who bears an interesting resemblance to Lee's Medea. When James writes to Lee in 1890 to thank her for sending him a copy of *Hauntings*, a collection of ghost stories which includes 'Amour Dure', he is somewhat dismissive of the genre even as he compliments Lee on her work:

The supernatural story, the subject wrought in fantasy, is not the *class* of fiction I myself most cherish (prejudiced as you may have perceived me in favour of a close connotation, or close observation, of the real, or whatever one may call it, - the familiar, the inevitable). But that only makes my enjoyment of your artistry more of a subjection.<sup>71</sup>

It is perhaps surprising then that, as Kerry Powell observes, in 'The Story of a Masterpiece' James should describe 'a portrait in many ways indebted to the magic-

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<sup>69</sup> For a useful discussion of the magic portrait motif, see Ziolkowski, Ch. 3.

<sup>70</sup> Poe's 'The Oval Portrait' was published in an extended version under the title 'Life in Death' in *Graham's Magazine* in April 1842 before being abridged and republished in the *Broadway Journal*, April 26, 1845.

<sup>71</sup> Henry James, letter to Vernon Lee, 27 April 1890, in Henry James, *Letters*, 1883-1895, 4 vols, ed. by Leon Edel (London: Macmillan, 1981), III, pp. 276-78, (p. 277).



picture tradition.’<sup>72</sup> The portrait to which Powell refers is in fact one of two paintings which appear in the text. The first is encountered by John Lennox, who finds in the portrait a resemblance to his bride-to-be:

It bore a representation of a half-length female figure, in a costume and with an expression so ambiguous that Lennox remained uncertain whether it was a portrait or a work of fancy: a fair-haired young woman, clad in a rich medieval dress, and looking like a countess of the Renaissance. Her figure was relieved against a sombre tapestry, her arms loosely folded, her head erect and her eyes on the spectator, toward whom she seemed to move - ‘*Dans un flot de velours trainant ses petits pieds.*’

As Lennox inspected her face it seemed to reveal a hidden likeness to a face he knew well - the face of Marian Everett.<sup>73</sup>

Intrigued by the portrait, Lennox learns from the artist, Stephen Baxter, that it is entitled *My Last Duchess* after Robert Browning’s poem.<sup>74</sup> Despite the poem’s sinister subtext in which the portrait can be understood as forming a substitute for a woman killed by her possessive husband for suspected sexual misdemeanours, Lennox finds that the longer he looks at Baxter’s painting, ‘the more he liked it, and the deeper seemed to be the correspondence between the lady’s expression and that with which he had invested the heroine of Browning’s lines’ and the ‘less accidental ... seemed that element which Marian’s face and the face on the canvas possessed in common’. (264). Impressed by Baxter’s artistry, Lennox asks him to paint a portrait of his beloved not knowing that

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<sup>72</sup> Kerry Powell, ‘Tom, Dick, and Dorian Gray: Magic-Picture Mania in Late Victorian Fiction’, *Psychological Quarterly*, 62 (1983), pp. 147-70, (p. 153).

<sup>73</sup> Henry James, ‘The Story of a Masterpiece’, in *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, 12 vols, ed. by Leon Edel (London: Hart-Davis, 1962), I, pp. 259-96, (p. 263). All subsequent references will be made in the text.

<sup>74</sup> Browning’s ‘My Last Duchess’ was first published under the title ‘Italy’ and appeared in *Bells and Pomegranates*, III, under *Dramatic Lyrics* in 1842.

Baxter and Marian were once involved in a romantic liaison that ended as a result of Marian's flirtatious behaviour. When the painting is completed, Lennox examines it to find:

It was Marian, in very truth, and Marian most patiently measured and observed. Her beauty was there, her sweetness, and her young loveliness and her aerial grace, imprisoned forever, made inviolable and perpetual ... The figure sat peacefully, looking slightly to the right, with the head erect and the hands - the virginal hands, without rings or bracelets - lying idle on its knees. The blond hair was gathered into a little knot of braids on the top of the head ... and left free the almost childish contour of the ears and cheeks. The eyes were full of color, contentment and light; the lips were faintly parted. Of color in the picture, there was, in strictness, very little; but the dark draperies told of reflected sunshine, and the flesh spaces of human blushes and pallors, of throbbing life and health' (283-84).

Although Lennox recognizes the portrait as 'his Marian' he finds that it discloses a superficiality of character which he had hitherto failed to notice and it displays a coldness that leads Lennox to formulate the question, 'Marian, where is your heart?' (284). To Lennox it seems 'that some strangely potent agency had won from his mistress the confession of her inmost soul, and had written it there upon the canvas' (285). Doubt sets in and Lennox cannot help but ask:

Was she a creature without faith and without conscience? What else was the meaning of that horrible blankness and deadness that quenched the light in her eyes and stole away the smile from her lips? (285).

Later, when the painting is exhibited alongside the portrait entitled *My last Duchess*, the contrast confirms, for Lennox, Marian's cynicism and heartlessness. Struck by the



dreadful prospect of a 'heartless union', Lennox sees no honourable escape and decides to go ahead regardless. However, when the portrait is delivered to his home on the eve of his wedding, he destroys it, stabbing it with 'a long keen poinard', thrusting it 'with barbarous glee, straight into the lovely face of the image', dragging it downward and making 'a long fissure in the living canvas' before wantonly hacking it across with 'half a dozen strokes' (295-96).

James' tale functions as an interesting revision of Browning's 'My Last Duchess', carrying a similar theme of jealousy and possession: Marian's grace, like the Duchess's beauty which is held captive in the curtained frame, is 'imprisoned forever, made inviolable and perpetual' in the painting Lennox has commissioned (283). In Baxter's hands, however, the second portrait appears to drain the vitality Marian displays as Browning's Renaissance beauty, and the murderous jealousy which leads Browning's duke to assassinate his wife, is here transformed into a 'murderous' disillusionment which leads Lennox to 'kill' the portrait. These differing responses are arguably due to the slippage that occurs between the two portraits of Marian. Although it is the first portrait which forms the visual counterpart to Browning's duchess, it is the second portrait which captures the 'reality' which supposedly becomes visible in the portrait of the duchess in Browning's poem. In the second painting, like the coquettish duchess whose looks, according to the duke's interpretation, 'went everywhere', Marian is revealed to have a 'levity' of soul, that marks her as 'a creature without faith and without conscience'<sup>75</sup> Yet there is a fundamental difference between the Browning poem and James' reworking of it in 'The Story of a Masterpiece'. Browning's rejection of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's

<sup>75</sup> Robert Browning, 'My Last Duchess', in *Selected Poetry*, ed. by Daniel Karlin (London: Penguin, 1989), l. 24, pp. 25-26, (p. 25).

image in sculpted form on the grounds that it would capture only the 'dead facts', is belied by the portrait in his poem. Here, the life of the subject exceeds the frame: the duchess looks 'as if she were alive'.<sup>76</sup> In contrast, Baxter's portrait of Marian which draws its tints from life, reveals a 'horrible blankness' and a 'deadness that quenched the light in her eyes and stole away the smile from her lips' (285). Whereas Browning's portrait shows a dead woman who, like Medea, seems very much alive, James' portrait of Marian shows a living woman who seems to be 'dead'. Arguably, this difference is confirmed by the fact that Lennox, on seeing the commissioned painting of Marian exhibited alongside that of Baxter's *My Last Duchess*, stands amazed and is prompted to ask of the latter, 'Was *this* the face and figure that, a month ago, had reminded him of his mistress? Where was the likeness now? It was utterly absent as if it had never existed' (294). The 'deadness' that shadows the picture of Marian, seems to infect other portraits that appear in James' work. In *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), the Bronzino portrait which resembles Milly Theale is, as Adeline Tintner has noted, no other than that which arguably also inspired Lee's Medea: the painting of Lucrezia Panciatichi.<sup>77</sup> Yet, as Catherine Maxwell points out whereas 'Lee's Bronzino has a peculiar animation ... in James' description the picture is sepulchral and epitaphic: the lady is very much dead'.<sup>78</sup>

James' tale resonates interestingly with that of Poe's 'The Oval Portrait'. In Poe's tale, a young girl is depicted in a 'vignette' in which her arms, bosom 'and even the ends of the radiant hair' melt 'imperceptibly into the vague yet deep shadow which formed the back-ground of the whole' and which holds the spectator spellbound with the

<sup>76</sup> Browning, 'My Last Duchess', l. 2, p. 25.

<sup>77</sup> See, Adeline Tintner, *Henry James and the Lust of the Eyes*, pp. 95-104.

<sup>78</sup> Maxwell, 'From Dionysus to "Dionea" : Vernon Lee's Portraits', p. 267.



‘absolute *life-likeness*’ of its expression.<sup>79</sup> The sitter is the artist’s wife who resents the attention her husband gives to Art, which she considers to be her ‘rival’ and his ‘bride’, and who sat ‘meekly for many weeks in the dark high turret-chamber where the light dripped upon the pale canvas only from overhead’ (252). The artist’s commitment to his art leads to the neglect of his young wife and he turns ‘his eyes from the canvas rarely, even to regard the countenance of his wife’ (252). He would not see that ‘the tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sate beside him’ and when the last brushstroke is done, and he stands ‘entranced’ before his work, proclaiming it to be ‘*Life* itself’, he turns to his wife only to find her dead (252-53).

In both James’ and Poe’s texts the woman is ‘killed’ into art. Marian’s moral deficiencies, which escape notice in the live model, are literally and figuratively drawn from Marian and stilled in her portrait that Lennox might see them. In Poe’s tale,

The subject becomes the artist’s palette from which he takes the colors to create the life-likeness of the canvas ... so that the representation of the woman becomes more real than the reality.<sup>80</sup>

According to Sylvia L. F. Richards, ‘This transference of life from the lady to the painting is termed *vampirism*’.<sup>81</sup> While James’ tale reads as a revision of Browning’s poem, Poe’s tale prefigures Christina Rossetti’s 1856 poem, ‘In an Artist’s Studio’ in which the portrait model, like Poe’s, is the victim of the artist’s act of vampirism:

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<sup>79</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, ‘The Oval Portrait’, in *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*, ed. by David Galloway (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 250-53, (p. 251). All subsequent page references are made in the text.

<sup>80</sup> Sylvia L. F. Richards, ‘The Eye and the Portrait: The Fantastic in Poe, Hawthorne and Gogol’, *Studies in Short Fiction*, 20 (1983), pp. 307-15, (p. 309).

<sup>81</sup> Richards, pp. 307-15, (p. 309).

He feeds upon her face by day and night,  
 And she with true kind eyes looks back on him  
 Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:  
 Not wan with waiting, nor with sorrow dim;  
 Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;  
 Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.<sup>82</sup>

Yet, as I point out in Chapter Three, the act of vampirism is self-perpetuating, and it is therefore perhaps fitting that the women ‘killed’ into art in the tales discussed in this chapter all seem to exist in an intermediary space between life and death. Portraiture appears to be that art which, like vampirism, can create a living death and ‘keep the form of the dead among the living’.<sup>83</sup> Marian, whose portrait tells of ‘human blushes and pallors, of throbbing life and health’ nevertheless conveys a ‘blankness’ and ‘deadness’; Poe’s portrait displays an uncanny ‘*life-likeness*’ despite being almost literally a ‘death-mask’ of the artist’s wife; Lee’s Medea looks as if she ‘could bite or suck like a leech’ although dead for hundreds of years, and the Alice Oke of 1626, is both ‘dead’ and ‘undead’: reincarnated in her descendant, the Alice Oke of the nineteenth century. What distinguishes Lee’s ‘vampires’ from those of James and Poe, is that Lee’s women, although very much dead, succeed in escaping the frame. In James’ and Poe’s tales it is the artist who is in control: it is the artist who succeeds in transposing the inner life of the woman onto the canvas. In Lee’s tales, the women not only elude the constraints of the frame, they also sap the power of the artist: Trepka is unable to complete his history, and the artist’s portrait of Alice Oke remains unfinished. That ‘purity of line’, which Trepka

<sup>82</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Poems and Prose*, ed. by Jan Marsh (London: Everyman, 1994), ll. 9-14, p. 52. Marsh states that the poem is ‘believed to be based on a visit to [Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s] studio, and his many portraits of Elizabeth Siddal’ (p. 433). This suggests that the concept of the artist as vampire is not exclusive to the fantastic tale.

<sup>83</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, ‘The Prophetic Pictures’, quoted in Richards, pp. 307-15, (p. 310).



perceives in the final portrait of Medea, that constructs the 'glazed armouring' of Bronzino's Mannerist figures, is not strong enough to contain her chthonian power, and, like Medea, Alice Oke, who for the artist is merely 'a wonderful series of lines' refuses the constraint of Apollonian form (122).<sup>84</sup>

Vampirism, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is associated with homo-eroticism via the androgynous vampire mouth with which it can feed on either sex. I would argue, however, that it also serves as a model for that embryonic fusion with the mother which informs Lee's negotiation of sexual identity for, in the womb, the baby 'feeds' on the mother's blood-enriched placenta, taking nutrients and oxygen from her body. In the tales of James and Poe, the artist/vampire is protected from the vampire woman he creates by the magic presence of the frame. Although Lee's artists are not the painters of the original portraits that inhabit her tales, they are arguably identified with them by implication: the unnamed artist in 'Oke of Okehurst' wants to capture (or re-capture) Alice's image, and Trepka wishes to 'frame' Medea in his history of Urbania. However, Lee's vampire women elude or escape the frames which their artists attempt to impose, and feed in turn on the artist himself. In this context, the vampiric actions of their sitters echo the child's vampiric feeding on the mother: the created feeds on the creator. If we return to Helene Deutsch's psychoanalytic model of lesbian desire in which the relationship between two women is described as 'a perfectly conscious mother and child situation, in which sometimes the one and sometimes the other played the part of the mother,' this vampiric model of pre-Oedipal union sheds new light on

Bertrand Russell's view of Lee as a 'vampire' and a 'bloodsucker'.<sup>85</sup> It suggests that

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<sup>84</sup> Paglia, p. 150.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in O'Connor and Ryan, p. 63.

the relationship between Lee's vampiric women and the 'artists' in 'Amour Dure' and 'Oke of Okehurst' function as expressions, however coded, of homoerotic interaction.

According to Camille Paglia, the vampire is also at large in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Paglia writes:

Basil and Dorian's first meeting ... invokes one of the primary Romantic principles, vampirism. In the middle of a party, Basil senses someone looking at him. Dorian's gaze is palpable ... When their eyes meet, Basil feels Dorian is 'so fascinating' as to 'absorb' him. At this moment of visual fixation, Dorian, like a vampire, dominates the plane of eye-contact. Basil, mesmerized, actually grows 'pale,' like the vampire's bled victim.<sup>86</sup>

Like the vampire, Dorian corrupts all those who fall under his spell: his friends 'lose all sense of honour, of goodness, of purity' (118) and like the commissioned painting of Marian in 'The Story of a Masterpiece', Dorian's picture mirrors those moral deficiencies: just as her portrait betrays her absent 'heart', so to Dorian his portrait reveals 'A face without a heart' (163). As in all the paintings we have encountered so far, the painting of Dorian is both 'dead' and 'undead' for though it is ostensibly the static representation of Dorian Gray, it secretly metamorphoses behind its purple cloth. The original stasis of the artwork is transferred to Dorian himself who remains as young, and as free from the signs of debauchery, as the day on which it was painted - therefore Dorian, too, exists in a borderland between 'life' and 'death'. Yet Wilde's story has more in common with Lee's tales than with those of James and Poe for, in Wilde's text, as in Lee's, it is the artist who is sucked dry. Describing his first meeting with Dorian to Lord Henry Wotton, Basil Hallward explains:

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<sup>86</sup> Paglia, p. 519.



I knew that I had come face to face with some one [*sic*] whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself (11)

Of Dorian's portrait he argues that it is not the sitter who is revealed by the painting, but the artist who 'on the coloured canvas reveals himself,' and informs Wotton, 'The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul' (10). For Hallward, Dorian is 'the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream' and, as he works on Dorian's portrait, it appears to him that 'every flake and film of colour' reveals his 'secret', the secret of his homoerotic desire for the beautiful boy (89-90). It seems only fitting, then, that Hallward should die at the hands of his own inspiration. The 'dream' that sapped his talent, also saps his life. Yet in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the sitter is inexorably linked with the artist. Looking at his actions reflected in the portrait, Dorian muses, 'Was there some subtle affinity between the chemical atoms, that shaped themselves into form and colour on the canvas, and the soul that was within him?' (76). His 'absorption' of Basil Hallward seems to have had an unexpected effect: not only does Dorian Gray literalize Pierre Nicole's metaphorical artist whose moral actions paint his likeness, the merging of his soul with that of Hallward also ensures that, like Hallward, the portrait will function as his conscience.

In the light of the vampiric relationship between mother and child described earlier, it seems significant that this uncanny symbiosis between Dorian and his portrait is described by Paglia as an 'umbilical link'.<sup>87</sup> Although for Paglia this connection is 'like the

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<sup>87</sup> Paglia, p. 526.

incestuous bond between Romantic twins', one might suggest that, in view of Winnicott's understanding of the mirror-role played by the mother's face, this 'umbilical link' reverts to its maternal root and it therefore seems significant that the portrait of Dorian's beautiful mother, dressed as a Bacchante, with 'vine leaves in her hair' and eyes that followed him 'wherever he went' also forms, as Kathy Alexis Psomiades has noted, 'a double to his own' (112-13).<sup>88</sup> Moreover, Dorian's response to the portrait (he at one point feigns to kiss 'those painted lips that now smiled so cruelly at him' (83) ) implies a return to a pre-Oedipal narcissism which, as in Lee's texts, permits that expression of same-sex desire which is one subtext of Wilde's novel.

Like Lee's fantastic tales, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* suggests a negotiation of homosexual identity within a liminal supernatural space and also, like Lee, Wilde's adherence to 'form' as the principle of aesthetic understanding is undermined within the supernatural text. As Paglia points out:

In *The Critic as Artist* [Wilde] says: 'Form is everything. It is the secret of life ... Start with the worship of form, and there is no secret in art that will not be revealed to you.' ... [Yet] What is odd about the picture of Dorian Gray is that it is in Dionysian metamorphosis. The changing painting insults beauty and form: Dorian calls it 'the misshapen shadow,' 'the hideous painted thing,' 'this monstrous soul-life.' ... Painting is invaded by a daemonic form-altering power, because Wilde has tried to make nature surrender her authority.<sup>89</sup>

While Paglia's point may be valid, the metamorphic properties of Dorian's portrait may be read quite differently. They may function, as in Lee's tales, as a process of exploring alternative identities. According to Martha Vicinus, in the nineteenth century the

<sup>88</sup> Kathy Alexis Psomiades, *Beauty's Body*, p. 187.

<sup>89</sup> Paglia, pp. 528-29.



‘beautiful boy’ (to which category Dorian most certainly belongs) encodes ‘the defining, free agent’ who best expressed homosexuality, and Psomiades argues that ‘Aestheticism’s beautiful masculine figures signify an erotic/aesthetic realm’ in which the idea of the beautiful functions as a ‘form of resistance to the medico-legal view of same-sex desire as ugly and perverse’.<sup>90</sup> In this context Dorian’s ‘misshapen’ portrait takes on a suggestive significance and expresses perhaps Wilde’s struggles with his own demons, and with his sexual orientation, perceived in the constraining ‘frame’ of his contemporary social conscience. Yet there is a fundamental difference between Wilde’s story and those of Lee’s. In Wilde’s text, Dorian’s attempt to destroy the portrait leads only to his own destruction. As he stabs the picture in a manner reminiscent of Lennox’s destruction of Marian’s portrait in James’ tale, an uncanny exchange takes place:

When they entered, they found hanging upon the wall, a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognised who it was (170).<sup>91</sup>

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the beautiful boy, it seems, must be trapped within art, within the constraints of a socially acceptable ‘frame’. In contrast, Lee’s portrait tales

<sup>90</sup> Vicinus, p. 92; Kathy Alexis Psomiades, *Beauty’s Body*, p. 181.

<sup>91</sup> The similarity between the ending of James’ tale and Wilde’s own prompts a reexamination of the significance of ‘Marian’ in James’ text. As we have seen in Ch. 3, in the nineteenth century, homosexual men were referred to as ‘Maryannes’. It seems possible that in his portrait of Marian, James, as literary artist, reveals something of himself, something that, like Dorian, must be destroyed, or contained within a social ‘frame’. It is also interesting that in Lee’s short story ‘Lady Tal’ published in *Vanitas. Polite Stories*, (London: Heinemann, 1892), pp. 7-119, the male protagonist, who bears more than a passing resemblance to Henry James, is called ‘Jervase Marion’ [my emphasis], and is referred to as ‘Mary Anne’ by Lady Tal’s cousin (p. 70). See also Ina Schabert, ‘An Amazon in Venice: Vernon Lee’s “Lady Tal”’, in *Venetian Views, Venetian Blinds: English Fantasies of Venice*, ed. by Manfred Pfister and Barbara Rodopi (Amsterdam: Scatt, 1999), pp. 155-67, p. 166).

feature dangerous, androgynous women who escape that frame, who refuse to be constrained. The ambiguity surrounding Medea ensures that she ‘lives’ on in our imaginations whether or not she was merely a figment of Trepka’s disordered mind, and Alice Oke, despite being shot, lives on in another world, ‘her wide-open white eyes’ smiling ‘vaguely and distantly’ (191), her ghostly reunion with Lovelock signalled by that ‘distant look in her grey eyes’ and ‘absent-looking smile in her thin cheeks’ (192). Transgressing the boundary of the picture frame, Lee’s portrait-women, succeed in doing what, according to Lee, the portrait cannot do: they ‘overcome space and baffle time’.<sup>92</sup> Each enacts a return to the maternal body which facilitates an expression of same-sex desire while simultaneously functioning as the embodiment of the phallic mother: an image of a powerful and dangerous androgyny. It is a process which is repeated in Lee’s tale ‘Dionea’ as we shall see, but with one significant difference.

### **‘Dionea’**

Like Medea da Carpi and Alice Oke, Dionea, a reincarnated pagan goddess, transgresses not only the borders of time, but also those of space. However, unlike Medea and Alice, who are initially constrained by the portrait frame from which they escape, Dionea refuses the frame entirely. When Dionea is chosen as the model for the sculptor Waldemar, a strange phenomenon occurs. In a letter to Dionea’s benefactress, the Lady

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<sup>92</sup>This ability to transgress the borders of time resonates interestingly with Martha Vicinus’ suggestion that in the nineteenth century the Past was often chosen by lesbian writers as a space in which their imagination might flourish unimpeded by contemporary restraints (see Vicinus, p. 101). It seems fascinating, then, that Lee’s women invade the present, though located in the past. This suggests perhaps, a frustration with contemporary constraints and a desire to break down those barriers that impede the expression of homosexuality in the present. .



Evelyn Savelli, Princess of Sabina, Lee's narrator Dr. Alessandro de Rosis writes:

How strange is the power of art! Has Waldemar's statue shown me the real Dionea, or has Dionea really grown more strangely beautiful than before? ... Do you remember - you, who have read everything - all the bosh of our writers about the Ideal in Art? Why, here is a girl who disproves all this nonsense in a minute; she is far, far more beautiful than Waldemar's statue of her.<sup>93</sup>

Waldemar's sculpture, intended as a statue of Venus, becomes instead a poor portrait-statue of Dionea with whose beauty it cannot compete. Dionea, it seems not only refuses the 'frame' of art, she exceeds it so completely that she cannot be captured at all. Yet I would argue that it is not only her superior beauty that enables this escape but also a Dionysian excess, a chthonian power, that defies the constricting lines of Apollonian artistry for, as Catherine Maxwell observes:

'Dionea' is another name for Aphrodite or Venus, Goddess of Love, who in some mythological genealogies is the daughter of Dione. Lee's choice of this particular name for Aphrodite with its evident echo of Dionysus seems deliberate: Dione, rather than Semele, is also said by some ancient commentators to be the mother of Dionysus as well as that of Venus.<sup>94</sup>

Like the strange Dionysian effigy in 'Marsyas in Flanders', Dionea is washed ashore, and being a young orphan, is placed in a convent where she is cared for by the Sisters of the Stigmata, under the watchful eye of Dr. Alessandro de Rosis, the village doctor, who, periodically, reports her progress to the Lady Evelyn Savelli. It is these reports that

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<sup>93</sup> Vernon Lee, 'Dionea', *Hauntings* (London: Heinemann, 1890), pp. 61-103, (pp. 95-96). All subsequent page references are made in the text.

<sup>94</sup> Maxwell, 'From Dionysus to "Dionea": Vernon Lee's Portraits', pp. 262-63.

construct the narrative of Lee's tale. Concerned that the young girl's name is not fitting for a convent resident, the nuns seek to christen her anew but are prevented from doing so by one of their number who discovers that a 'Saint Dionea, Virgin and Martyr' exists and consequently sanctifies the pagan name (66). Dionea soon proves an unusual, and not altogether welcome, addition to the convent. Beautiful but unruly, she shows no aptitude for those traditional skills that are cherished by the sisters, and in her early teens is caught in the process of committing sacrilegious offences. On one occasion, she is discovered 'handling in a suspicious manner the Madonna's gala frock and her best veil of pizzo di Cantù' and is reputed to have been surprised 'as she was about to adorn her wicked little person with these sacred garments' (71). On another occasion she is found in the chapel, 'seated on the edge of the altar, in the very place of the Most Holy Sacrament' (72). When confronted by the ecclesiastical council concerning these events, Dionea cuts an incongruous figure among the plaster images of St. Francis and the Virgin Mary. Wild and dark, she has 'an odd, ferocious gleam in her eyes,' and sports 'a still odder smile, tortuous, serpentine, like that of Leonardo da Vinci's women' (72). Dionea's strange reputation precedes her entry into the outside world, and though acutely aware of her beauty, the village boys view her with feelings 'rather of fear than of love' (73). A 'glance from her' is considered 'too much' for their peace of mind, and she is regarded as 'possessing the evil eye' (74). Dionea's strange influence manifests itself in a series of unusual events. Her presence acts as a malevolent love-potion that leads to unhappy liaisons, 'wherever she goes the young people must needs fall in love with each other, and usually where it is far from desirable' (74). The convent succumbs to a form of love-



sickness: 'an extraordinary love epidemic' smites its schoolgirls; 'Unknown things' spring up 'in these good Sisters' hearts'; one of their number elopes with a young sailor; and a young priest, the convent confessor, dies suddenly, having battled an unknown temptation (75-76). When she becomes old enough to leave the convent, de Rosis ponders the difficulties of finding Dionea a welcoming household. Her reputation ensures that no-one in the village will have her and he is forced to place her with a rich patriarch, Sor Agostino, who is soon mysteriously struck by lightning: an act attributed indirectly to Dionea who had warned him 'that if he did not leave me alone Heaven would send him an accident' (82). Dionea returns to the village where she lives alone, surrounded only by the white pigeons that follow her, surviving ostensibly on Lady Evelyn's charity and by performing a number of 'miscellaneous jobs' but 'her real status', as de Rosis points out, 'is that of village sorceress' (85).

When the sculptor Waldemar, a friend of Lady Evelyn's, arrives for a stay in the village he is welcomed by de Rosis who takes a particular liking to Waldemar's wife, Gertrude, who reminds him of 'a Memling Madonna finished by some Tuscan sculptor' (89). It is to the sculptor's love for his 'pale, demure, diaphanous' wife that de Rosis attributes the sculptor's lack of interest in the female form as a subject for artistic representation (91):

I think that hereby hangs the explanation of his never doing any but male figures: the female figure, he says ... is almost inevitably inferior in strength and beauty; woman is not form, but expression, and therefore suits painting, but not sculpture. The point of a woman is not her body, but (and here his eyes rested very tenderly upon the thin white profile of his wife) her soul (90).

It would seem that for Waldemar, as for Winckelmann and for Pater, the Ideal in sculpture is male. Gertrude, however, sets her heart on Waldemar sculpting a female figure and, to the Lady Evelyn, de Rosis voices his disapproval that 'such a snow-white saint' should be on the lookout for a model for her husband and 'should wish another woman to part with all instincts of modesty' so that Waldemar might create (91). Gertrude's eyes light on Dionea who becomes the model for Waldemar's statue of Venus which he sculpts in 'the long-desecrated chapel' of an old Genoese fort that, according to popular legend, lies on the site 'of the temple of Venus' (96). As Waldemar becomes increasingly obsessed with Dionea's superior beauty, Gertrude's jealousy grows, and when one night he decides to pose her before the statue of Venus, 'by an artificial light' in the way in which 'the ancients lit up the statues in their temples', Gertrude follows him with disastrous consequences. De Rosis writes:

He had placed Dionea on the big marble block behind the altar, a great curtain of dull red brocade ... behind her, like a Madonna of Van Eyck's. He showed her to me once before like this, the whiteness of her neck and breast, the whiteness of the drapery round her flanks, toned to the colour of old marble by the light of the resin burning in pans all around ... Before Dionea was the altar - the altar of Venus which he had borrowed from me. He must have collected all the roses about it, and thrown the incense upon the embers when Gertrude suddenly entered (101-02).

We can only guess what followed, but what is discovered are the remains of the pyre, constructed from 'faggots of dry myrtle and heather', 'pine-cones' and 'resin', and the body of Gertrude slumped across the altar, 'her pale hair among the ashes of the incense, her blood ... trickling among the carved garlands and rams' heads, blackening the heaped-



up roses' (101-02). Waldemar's corpse is found 'at the foot of the castle cliff' (102).

Dionea mysteriously disappears, but de Rosis logs a last sighting of her:

a sailor-boy assures me, by all the holy things, that the day after the burning of the Castle chapel ... he met at dawn, off the island of Palmaria, beyond the strait of Porto Venere, a Greek boat, with eyes painted on the prow, going full sail to sea, the men singing as she went. And against the mast, a robe of purple and gold about her, and a myrtle-wreath on her head, leaned Dionea, singing words in an unknown tongue, the white pigeons circling around her (102-03).

Dionea, as Catherine Maxwell has noted in her essay, 'From Dionysus to "Dionea": Vernon Lee's Portraits' is 'Venus Aphrodite' a 'god in exile' who is intimately linked to Pater's 'Denys L'Auxerrois' (1887) and to his description of the *La Gioconda* in *The Renaissance*.<sup>95</sup> Interestingly, Maxwell also associates Dionea with Medea, and with Alice Oke and traces their comparable characteristics:

The strange, beautiful and demanding women who figure in these stories insist on crossing the boundaries of historical time; they require the performance of ritual and the sacrifice, most importantly, of male devotees. There is also something about them that eludes a fixed representation, and certainly possession.<sup>96</sup>

Dionea, then, is another of Lee's fatal women and, like Pater's Mona Lisa, and her counterparts, Medea, and Alice Oke, she, too, is 'a blasphemous and sacrilegious reversal' of the Virgin Mary. Like those pagan gods in exile who sometimes return 'in the stolen garb of the Madonna or the saints' (83), Dionea is seen adorning herself in the Virgin's

<sup>95</sup> Maxwell, 'From Dionysus to "Dionea": Vernon Lee's Portraits' p. 264. Dionea also functions as a female counterpart to Lee's Marsyas in Marsyas in Flanders. When Dionea is baptized 'she kicked and plunged and yelled like twenty little devils, and positively would not let the holy water touch her' (pp. 64-65), recalling Marsyas' rejection of the holy cross.

<sup>96</sup> Maxwell, 'From Dionysus to "Dionea": Vernon Lee's Portraits', p. 265.

sacred garments, her name is taken from that Saint Dionea, a 'Virgin and Martyr', and for de Rosis, Dionea's pose behind the altar is reminiscent of 'a Madonna of Van Eyck's' (66, 101). Yet de Rosis' comment has interesting implications for it posits Dionea as a double, not only of the Virgin, but also of the artist's wife Gertrude who is herself like a 'Memling Madonna' (89) and this duplication is echoed elsewhere in the text for, just as Dionea is 'as cold as ice, as pure as snow', Gertrude is a 'a snow-white saint' (87, 91). The twinning of these two women has intriguing implications for, as Kristeva points out, it is the 'passion between two women' which creates 'one of the most intense figures of doubling'.<sup>97</sup> Although Lee's tale explores Dionea's ability to cause people to fall in love with each other 'where it is far from desirable' the examples given are purely heterosexual. However, one might argue that there is a lesbian subtext to Lee's tale. It is not made clear what 'Unknown things' sprang up in the hearts of the good Sisters of the Stigmata, but if, as Ruth Vanita suggests, these same-sex communities carry those connotations of autoeroticism and homosexuality outlined in Diderot's *La Religieuse*, then Lee's use of 'Stigmata' in this context is suggestive for, as we have seen, in her supernatural tales Lee's 'stained' and bloodied women are arguably linked to expressions of lesbian sexuality. The blood which trickles from Gertrude's dead and naked body therefore takes on an added significance - she becomes yet another of Lee's 'dolls' stained by the 'impurities' of a transgressive desire. In the light of this, Gertrude's jealousy, interpreted by de Rosis to be directed at Dionea, may in fact be directed at Waldemar, envying his time with Dionea for, if we return to the text, it is worth noting that it is Gertrude who identifies Dionea as the model for Venus. This suggests an attraction to Dionea and a recognition of her sexual

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<sup>97</sup> Quoted in Weir, p. 83.



power. Moreover, Dionea herself is symbolically associated with lesbian love for ‘her great desire ... to get *back to the sea*’ employs marine imagery which, according to Ruth Vanita, is prevalent in lesbian poems such as Renee Vivien’s ‘Undine’ (67-68).<sup>98</sup>

Furthermore, as de Rosis points out, Dionea’s wish is to get ‘*back to the sea*’ implying that the sea is her home rather than the route to a desired destination. In the context of this discussion, the sea as source suggests the maternal body and employs, once again, that model of lesbian desire as a return to the mother’s body.

It appears that the sexual fluidity which marks so many of Lee’s other tales is equally in evidence in *Dionea*. When Gertrude offers Dionea to Waldemar as his model for Venus, he initially rejects her, preferring to sculpt male figures, and argues, ‘I have found a model - a fisher-boy, whom I much prefer to any woman’ (92). Waldemar’s affirmation of the male body as the sculptural ideal resonates interestingly with the works of J. J. Winckelmann, A. J. Symonds, and Walter Pater discussed in previous chapters and suggests that there is an homoerotic subtext to his artistic preferences. Moreover, Gertrude, despite being pregnant, has that incorporeal ‘diaphanous’ presence which is also used to describe the boyish Alice Oke and this suggests that their ostensibly heterosexual marriage encodes homoerotic desires. Although, reputed by de Rosis to be obsessed with Dionea, Waldemar’s passion is the infatuation of the artist with the living work of art, for Dionea exceeds his own creation, and has, from the beginning, been ‘a thing fit for ... Burne Jones or Tadmora’ to paint (68). In addition, as god in exile, it is clear that Dionea herself can be identified as an androgynous entity for she is linked to ‘the Phidian Pallas’ and the ‘Venus of Milo’, both of which Waldemar posits as fitting

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<sup>98</sup> Vanita, p. 66.

subjects for sculpture, arguing that ‘those are not women’ (90). It seems significant, then, that Waldemar’s final desire is to pose Dionea in the flickering light of ‘the resin burning in pans all round’, recalling that phenomenon which, captured in the Greek term ‘poikilos’, serves to encode homoerotic love (102).

In this tale, as in ‘Amour Dure’ and ‘Oke of Okehurst’, the artist, that counterpart to Lee’s public persona, is thwarted, his control defied and exceeded by the mirror-image he seeks in his art. In his place we are left with a vision of a powerful androgynous figure, whose image, like his own, shifts with multiple identifications. It is perhaps only fitting that, like the sacrificial pyre in Lee’s tale ‘The Doll’, Waldemar’s kindling should include the ‘pine cone’ for as Navarette observes, the pine cone is ‘sacred to Dionysus’, and Dionysus, as we have seen, is the god of transformation, who ‘enables you for a short time to *stop being yourself*, and thereby set you free’.<sup>99</sup> Here, as elsewhere in Lee’s supernatural fiction, Dionysian fluidity allows the expression of alternative identities and transgressive desires.

### **Women Old and New: Vernon Lee’s Medusas**

Dionea, as we have seen, has much in common with those other *femmes fatales* Medea da Carpi and Alice Oke. Like Medea, and her namesake, Medea of Colchis, Dionea is witch-like, privy to arcane knowledge that is specifically linked to the idea of cruel love. Like Alice, she projects an autoerotic plenitude that defies all interference, and like both Medea and Alice, the desires she inspires lead to death and/or figurative castration. Interestingly,

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<sup>99</sup> Navarette, p. 171; Paglia, p. 97.



according to Rebecca Stott, the *femme fatale* is related to ‘another familiar type’ in turn-of-the-century literature: the New Woman.<sup>100</sup> However, Stott argues that there is a fundamental difference:

Unlike the New Woman, the *femme fatale* is mythically rooted and derives power from her association with figures such as Cleopatra, Salome, Judith, Helen, mermaids and sirens ... The New Woman, in contrast, comes to refer to a new type of woman emerging from the changing social and economic conditions of the late nineteenth century: she is a woman who challenges dominant sexual morality, and who begins to enter new areas of employment and education. While she is often threatening, and sometimes sexually threatening, in her challenging of sexual norms, she does not carry the sexual fatalism of the *femme fatale* type.<sup>101</sup>

While one may seek in vain for Lee’s name in the New Woman debates of the *fin de siècle*, she nevertheless fulfills the image of this independent, outspoken ‘mannish’ figure, and it seems significant that in 1993 Elaine Showalter included her work amongst that of New Woman writers in the collection *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle*.<sup>102</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the *femme fatale*, to whom, as Stott suggests, the New Woman is related, should appear as a transgressive figure in Lee’s supernatural tales. However, I suggest that, in Lee’s work, the New Woman can also claim kin with those mythical figures which Stott identifies exclusively with the *femme fatale*.

As I argue in Chapter One, the New Woman’s strident vocality is mythologically linked to the Medusan cry, and it is this cry which is aestheticized by Lee’s ‘Athenian’

<sup>100</sup> Rebecca Stott, preface to *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death* (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. viii-xiv, (p. viii).

<sup>101</sup> Stott, pp. viii-ix.

<sup>102</sup> See Vernon Lee, ‘Lady Tal’ in *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle*, pp. 192-261.

public persona in the flute-like voice of the 'castrato': a voice which is simultaneously male and female and 'embodied' in the pseudonym 'Vernon Lee'. Yet, as I also point out, Athena and Medusa are irrevocably linked: Athena wears the head of Medusa on her breast-plate and on her shield, and, interestingly, in Lee's tales, the castrato is endowed with that dangerous and paralyzing power that is attributed to his dark Medusan counterpart. Perhaps it is only to be expected, then, that Lee's portrait-women, those *femmes fatales* who also exhibit the independence, self-sufficiency, and the androgynous features of the New Woman, should similarly display Medusan characteristics. Medea, whose 'intensity of look' 'looks out of the frame with a cold level glance' wears her hair in snake-like 'curls'. In his miniature, the disembodied head of Christopher Lovelock, who functions as a 'double' for Alice Oke, is reminiscent of the head of Medusa, and Dionea who has 'an odd, ferocious gleam in her eyes,' is said, like Medusa, to carry a fatal glance and is thought to possess 'the evil eye'. Moreover, those Paterian adjectives: 'strange', 'exquisite', 'uncanny', 'weird' used in descriptions of the three women, are those Lee and Sargent use to describe the portrait of Farinelli: a castrato, whose voice, I claim, is associated with Medusa's gorgonian cry.

If we return to Winnicott's concept of the portrait as the mother's face in which we seek our own reflections, and affirm our own existence, Lee's Medusan portrait-women become intriguingly suggestive. They imply that what Lee sees when she looks at her supernatural portraits is Medusa, a figure who challenges and paralyzes her Athenian persona, that sexless figure who upholds the constraints of Apollonian art in her aestheticism. In effect, Athena and Medusa are doubles: Medusa is 'the other self of



Athena', she represents the sexualized Athena, symbolizing 'the staining and corruption of the virginal membrane' which, in Athena, must remain intact.<sup>103</sup> As goddess of heaven and culture, Athena must retain that purity that allows her to partake of Olympian power. Yet, Athena, like Lee, is 'threatened from within, by her own Medusan nature' that wishes to yield to transgressive desires.<sup>104</sup> Interestingly, one of the items with which Athena arms Perseus for his execution of the gorgon, is 'her own aegis, a solar shield-mirror-weapon, which saves Perseus from being killed by Medusa's terrible sight'.<sup>105</sup>

Ewa Kuryluk argues that:

Perseus executed Medusa, but the moving spirit behind the act was Minerva [Athena], the honorary male of the Greek Olympus. By murdering Medusa, she shed off her female physiology, sexuality, and destiny which would have collided with her power as the virgin-goddess of heaven.<sup>106</sup>

'Medusa's death', as Kuryluk observes, 'transformed Minerva [Athena] into an artist'.<sup>107</sup>

Yet Medusa made an indelible mark that Athena could not erase: 'As Medusa lay bleeding to death, her dreadful likeness was caught again by Minerva's [Athena's] mirror - to stay there forever'.<sup>108</sup> One might argue that Lee, like Perseus, uses a mirror-shield, the shield of Apollonian art to deflect Medusa's power, and on that shield, as on Athena's, the gorgon's head remains, and her snaky locks resurface in the borderlands of Lee's

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<sup>103</sup> Kuryluk, p. 154.

<sup>104</sup> Kuryluk, p. 156. Kuryluk tells us that 'Medusa's mythology and imagery survived in the medieval legends of Melusine, a charming woman who periodically turns into a siren with a fish - or snaketail instead of feet, and similar monsters' (p. 160). Aspects of this legend can be recognized in Lee's tale 'Prince Alberic and the Snake-Lady'. Space forbids the inclusion of a discussion of this text. However, for the lesbian implications of Lee's story, see Hotchkiss, '(P)revising Freud: Vernon Lee's Castration Phantasy'.

<sup>105</sup> Kuryluk, p. 154.

<sup>106</sup> Kuryluk, p. 154.

<sup>107</sup> Kuryluk, p. 158.

<sup>108</sup> Kuryluk, p. 154.

supernatural tales. In this liminal space, in this 'shadowy border territory,' her power is regained.<sup>109</sup> Yet, for Athena, as for 'the soul portrait of Dorian Gray', the gorgon's 'fluid, serpentine reflection' not only tarnishes 'the immaculate goddess,' it also shields her.<sup>110</sup>

As Kuryluk points out:

The aegis confronts us not with a public front, but with a private back, not with a god's face or head, but with a goddess's 'underface' - emblematic of a menstruating vagina, decapitation, and castration. The *vera icon* ['true' image] of Medusa does not cure. Flashed at the beholder, it petrifies him with terror, offering Minerva [Athena] the best protection from male assault.<sup>111</sup>

The 'true' image of Vernon Lee, that Medusan image which admits transgressive desires, and permits the negotiation of a fluid sexuality may, it seems, also have been her best defence in a male-dominated world. It is perhaps a likeness that Henry James glimpsed through a chink in her Athenian armour, for he was to warn his brother William against an acquaintance with Lee on the grounds that 'she is as dangerous and uncanny as she is intelligent, which is saying a great deal. Her vigour and sweep of intellect are most rare and her talk superior altogether'.<sup>112</sup> In Lee's tales it seems that Medusa functions as both subject and object: her maternal presence providing that 'holding environment' which allows Lee to play with her image, while her myriad manifestations in the art objects that litter Lee's texts act as 'transitional objects' which assist Lee's negotiation of alternative sexual identities in the liminal, transitional space of the supernatural. She represents not

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<sup>109</sup> Segal, p. 20.

<sup>110</sup> Kuryluk, p. 155.

<sup>111</sup> Kuryluk, p. 158.

<sup>112</sup> Letter from Henry James to William James, 20th January 1893, James Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, as quoted in Mannocchi, ' "Vernon Lee": A Reintroduction and Primary Bibliography', p. 231.



only Lee's engagement with her darker self, but also with her own creative power - her own Medusa.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> In 'Medusa and the Female Gaze', Susan R. Bowers argues that 'women achieve greater creativity by braving the encounter with their own creative power, their own Medusa' (p. 233).

## **Coda**



In her conclusion to *The Handling of Words and other Studies in Literary Psychology* (1923), Vernon Lee is at pains to make a distinction between the Dionysian nature of the word as expressed by Friedrich Nietzsche, and her own understanding of the term and its role in literature. For Nietzsche,

the word - and he was apt to feel it rather as the spoken than the written word - was essentially the response, almost the reflex, the impatient, violent, contemptuous and often self-contemptuous venting and easing of his inner distress, of his instability, soreness and frenzy. To such, as he called himself, a Dionysiac man, and to all mankind in its Dionysiac moods, the word is a cry, sometimes a curse, at best an invocation of the unattainable.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast the works of writers 'like Goethe or Browning' enable 'both them and us to take up position to what is not ourself and to whatever in ourself had better not be'.<sup>2</sup> In this way,

the Writer's soul can be transmitted to that of the Reader, helping him to see and feel if not the same thing, at least his own share of things in the same serene and lucid manner, remodelling himself and the world, however little, according to his choice. The word is then no longer what Nietzsche called Dionysiac and described with mixed self-satisfaction and disgust. It does not deal with self at all except as part of the great otherness of contemplation and understanding. We may call it *Apollinian*: an instrument of lucid truthful vision, of healing joy, and perchance even of such prophecy as makes itself come true.<sup>3</sup>

The division which Lee makes between the 'Dionysiac' word and its 'Apollinian'

counterpart arguably expresses that conflict which is played out in the contrasts between

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<sup>1</sup> Vernon Lee, *The Handling of Words and other Studies in Literary Psychology* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1927), p. 314.

<sup>2</sup> Lee, *The Handling of Words*, p. 315.

<sup>3</sup> Lee, *The Handling of Words*, p. 315.

her aesthetic writing and her supernatural fiction.<sup>4</sup> In the former, she is concerned with form, with order: true art is conceived as something external to the self, untouched by the vagaries of the artist's unruly personality, existing only to give pleasure in the perfection of a musical composition, the clarity of a sculptural plane. Yet, in her supernatural fiction those art objects chosen for their Apollonian purity often display Dionysian properties of violence, sensuality, and instability (sexual or otherwise). Interestingly, a similar phenomenon manifests itself at work in *The Handling of Words*: the Apollonian word, the paternal 'word' which Kristeva identifies as the 'symbolic', is undermined by the Dionysian 'semiotic' rhythms that underlie Lee's work. Her instruments of 'lucid truthful vision' are clouded by her own writing.

In *Belcaro*, as we have seen, Lee argues that the preverbal 'cry' differentiates into on the one hand 'the word' which, 'as it develops acquires a more precise and abstract signification, becomes more and more of a symbol,' and on the other, 'the song' which becomes 'more and more a complete unsymbolic form'.<sup>5</sup> However, as I claim in Chapter One, the cry remains implicit in the song which, as Kristeva argues, disrupts, and therefore 'semiotizes' the symbolic by giving 'music,' 'melody,' 'harmony,' and 'rhythm' to language.<sup>6</sup> It is intriguing, then, to note that in *The Handling of Words*, Lee compares the writing of literature to musical composition:

You must remember that in every kind of literary composition, from the smallest essay to the largest novel, you are constantly introducing new themes, as in a piece of music, and working all the *themes* into one another ... The novel may be

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<sup>4</sup> Although Lee uses the words 'Apollinian' and 'Dionysiac' in her own texts, I will use the more familiar 'Apollonian' and 'Dionysian' when not quoting Lee directly.

<sup>5</sup> Lee, 'Chapelmaster Kreisler', p. 115.

<sup>6</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language', p. 113; *Polylogue*, p. 73.



considered as a tragic symphony, opera, or oratorio, with a whole orchestra. The essay is a little sonata, trio, sometimes a mere little song. But even in a song, how many melodic themes, harmonic arrangements, accents, and so forth! I could wish young Writers, if they have any ear, to unravel the parts of a fugue, the themes of a Beethoven sonata. By analogy, they would learn a great many things.<sup>7</sup>

Evidently it is a lesson which Lee learned with gusto for in his reading of an extract from 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady', Burdett Gardner writes:

At this point it becomes evident that the whole structure of the passage is based upon an analogy with a musical composition. The theme announced to Alberic by sound on awaking in his room is carried on by vision when he goes out into the May night. He is beckoned up the hill by a duet of sight and sound, and when he reaches the point of rendezvous the importance of the fact is emphasized by a climactic paragraph in which three sections of the orchestra of sense join harmoniously.<sup>8</sup>

Yet this desire to mingle the word with the song suggests a yearning to regress to a preverbal stage of existence. Moreover, Lee's choice of title for this treatise on writing implies that, for her, words function as 'objects' for here words are 'handled' not 'written'. What seems particularly significant is that in *The Handling of Words*, Lee associates the process of writing with the play instinct:

Exorbitantly on the Writer's part ... the need for literature is explained by one of the primary impulses of the human being: the impulse to revive impressions when they are important, to revisit, or failing that, to talk about all places, persons and things which have a power over our feelings. Oddly enough the theorizers on Art, and on the Play Instinct supposed to underlie art, have done scant justice to this

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<sup>7</sup> Lee, *The Handling of Words*, pp. 6-8.

<sup>8</sup> Gardner, p. 16.

impulse; yet instances of it crowd at every step, and the utility of it to the individual and to the race is manifest. Thus it is evident that the pleasure in make-believe at the core of all childish games is the pleasure in the thought of the horse, the lion, the wild Indian, and with small girls, of the baby, the wardrobe and the kitchen; these items can put the child into a pleasant frame of mind, an agreeable excitement; and the child by that process of make-believe, sets about reviving that pleasure. The instinct continues throughout life.<sup>9</sup>

For Lee, then, the word represents a form of ‘transitional object’ which assists the child’s negotiation of illusion and reality, its assertion of its own identity, its own impressions, and memories. Importantly, Lee argues that the word’s role in the play instinct continues in adulthood. It is unsurprising, then, that Lee should admit to ‘playing’ with different identities in the process of her own development as a writer: she writes:

I have come to a very important stage in this disquisition, namely, the statement that all art lives and develops by our first tackling whatever we want to say or show by the use of the formulae of our predecessors ... critical investigation of the works of authors taken at random would, I think, confirm my own experience: that it is the rarest thing in the world for a writer to be, so to speak, himself from the very outset. Among my own contemporaries, especially in the one I know best, I can recognize long preliminary stages of being *not oneself*; of being; *being* not merely *trying* to be, an adulterated Ruskin, Pater, Michelet, Henry James, or a highly watered-down mixture of these and others, with only a late, rather sudden, curdling and emergence of something one recognizes ... *as oneself*.<sup>10</sup>

Significantly, the process of ‘being *not oneself*’ is, as we have seen, linked to Dionysian instability. As Camille Paglia argues, Dionysus is the god who enables you to ‘*stop being yourself*, ... The aim of his cult was *ecstasis* - which could mean anything from “taking

<sup>9</sup> Lee, *The Handling of Words*, p. 105.

<sup>10</sup> Lee, *The Handling of Words*, p. 295-96. Interestingly, this state of being ‘not oneself’ seems to affect many of the artists/writers in Lee’s tales, among them Winthrop, Magnus, and Spiridion Trepka.

<sup>11</sup> Paglia, p. 97.



you out of yourself' to a profound alteration of personality'.<sup>11</sup> In view of Lee's admission, it is perhaps fitting that Lee's early work, her supernatural fiction, should be marked by Dionysian properties. At this stage of development it is clear that Lee 'plays' with her literary identity. But, as she claims in her conclusion to *The Handling of Words*, the Dionysian word is often a 'cry' that vents the pressures of 'inner distress', of 'instability', it acts as an 'invocation of the unattainable'. Given the mercurial sexuality of the literary personae that appear in these works, I argue that, in the potential spaces of the supernatural, this Dionysian 'other' is allowed to exist, sustained by the suggestive sexual ambiguity, and coded desires of its Apollonian counterpart, 'Vernon Lee'.

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